

木崎ちあき
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博多豚骨 ラーメンズ 2

HAKATA TONKOTSU RAMENS



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Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens

vol.2

by Chiaki Kisaki

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Season Opening Ceremony & First Inning

Season Opening Ceremony

“I’m a killer, and I came to kill you today.”

Shunsuke Saruwatari concisely stated his business and flicked open the knife he was holding.

The other man was greatly surprised. Since a killer with a weapon suddenly busted into the bathroom as he submerged himself into the bathtub and was relaxing, it was natural for him to be shocked.

“Here.”

The man was even more surprised when Saruwatari handed over his knife.

“.....Eh?”

His mouth gaped open, and he stared at Saruwatari’s face. He had thought he would be killed out right, yet for some reason the killer gave him his weapon. *How come? What does he mean to do with this? Is it a trap?* Uncomprehending, the man was left bewildered. That was his mannerism.

“Here,” Saruwatari grasped the blade of the knife and had the scabbard face the other. “Take it.”

“Ha? Eh? W-why -”

“Get right on with it.”

So he was pressured, and the man took the knife in hand in fear.

“It’d be hella boring just to kill ya, so I’ll give ya a chance.” he told him, and the edges of his mouth curved up into a smile. “You can get away if ya beat me an’ win.”

The man’s expression turned hard at Saruwatari’s words. He was completely nude, but he had a knife. On the other hand, Saruwatari was unarmed. He was dressed in a rough looking outfit with a parka and sarouel pants. He could win. The man made a splash getting up from the bath tub hastily.

“Oowaaah!”

While letting out a war cry like a shriek the man made his attack. He thrust the knife towards Saruwatari’s heart. Saruwatari hit his hand, and when he dodged the tip of the knife he put in a hit in the man’s face. He grabbed the back of the staggering man’s head and shoved him into the bathtub. Air escaped from the man’s mouth, and the water’s surface bubbled like a jacuzzi. After awhile the man’s frantic movements stopped. It was Saruwatari’s win. It was too short.

He sighed. In the end it did not change from being boring. Employees at Murder Inc. did not have the concept of a general national holiday. New Year’s was also work. And the employees were running about with murders even today being New Year’s Eve. And Saruwatari, having been with the company for seven years, was one of them. When he headed back to the company after finishing the deed, it was already past noon as he was going to report to his superior and client. He was hungry, so Saruwatari headed to the staff canteen.

With it being lunch time and busy for New Year’s Eve, the cafeteria was crowded with employees. He ordered the special grilled fish and took a seat in the corner. As he was pecking at the fish with his chopsticks, he saw one of his co-workers carrying katsu curry on a tray heading towards him. He was a Vietnamese man named Nguyen. He had strong facial features and healthy skin. Such an non-Japanese like appearance made him easily stand out in a crowd of people.

“Hey there, good work.” Nguyen took a seat facing Saruwatari. Taking a look at his complexion, he gave a wry smile. “You look tired. Had an overnight shift?”

“Yeah, well,” Saruwatari nodded as he brought the rice to his mouth. “I killed a weak one.”

He recalled this job from this morning. He had heard the target was a killer, so he anticipated it to be a bit fun. But in actuality he was just a one timer with the name of one. Simply put, it was a boring job.

And it was not limited to just today. He considered all his jobs boring. Since he joined the company he never once felt he had a job worth while. Not a single strong opponent that could endanger Saruwatari’s life ever appeared. Every

one of them were killed without resistance. He did not like that.

It was not that he wanted to torment the weak. It just was not fun if they did not make a counterattack, and it was not fun if they were not strong. Saruwatari right now felt like a player holding back against a weaker, unskilled team with him having a ten point lead at the ninth inning. He wanted to fight in more thrilling circumstances. A match with a veteran team with a one point lead, no outs, and bases loaded. He wanted to get up on the mound at such a setting and make three strikes on the next three people consecutively.

“Every job is an easy victory to you though.” Nguyen smiled. He entered the company the same time he did, and he knew Saruwatari’s strength more than anyone here. “It’d be quite the mess if our company couldn’t ask you to kill the small fry.”

“Every damn year I’m feeling it’s a-getting busy though.” Even though there should be newcomers every year. “They need to hire some new recruits.”

It was commonplace in any work place for new employees to not stay and retire quickly, but the tendency was especially so for this company. Perhaps coupled with the contents of the business, but there were far more retirements, disappearances, and deaths on duty than number of people who joined the company.

“ – Speaking of new recruits,” Nguyen seemed to remember something. “Was it the rookie from this year, Saitou? Seems he was sent to Fukuoka.”

“Saitou?”

“Yeah, that timid guy. He was next to you.”

“.....Ahh, right.” He remembered him. “There was that sort of guy ‘round here.”

The junior who sat next to Saruwatari’s desk was certainly called Saitou. Though at some point the top of his desk was cleaned off, and he completely stopped coming to the company.

“Why was he sent there?”

“He failed in killing the parliamentarian. I had to clean after his ass.”

“Ahh, that right.”

Saruwatari did not have the disposition to get to know someone else deeply from the start, so he could not quite remember what kind of man Saitou was. He only remembered him writing his formal apology while crying.

“Still what a disaster. To get transferred to Fukuoka.” He put a spoonful of curry into his mouth, and after chugging down water he continued. “Isn’t Fukuoka the battleground of the killer industry? It’ll be tough for a newbie. Seems there’s lots of ‘killer-killers’ too.”

“.....Killer-killer?” It was a term he was unfamiliar with. Saruwatari dropped his chopsticks and moved his gaze upward. “What’s that now?”

“You don’t know? It’s a killer who specializes in killing killers.” Nguyen pointed the tip of the spoon towards Saruwatari’s face and continued. “Among them are fairly strong ones, and apparently they killed some of our own guys too.”

“.....Killing killers, huh.”

Chills ran down his spine. An unknown emotion crept up his whole body. It speed up little by little.

“Naturally their habitat is different from ours.” Nguyen groaned.

Fairly strong, killing killers, habitat – He digested Nguyen’s words in his mind. And then he imagined it. Him facing off with the killer-of-killers. A fight between two killers with which living or dying uncertain. *And isn’t that what I’m searching for? If I can fight with the killer-killer, I could be satisfied.* That was what he thought.

“.....Hey, Nguyen.”

“What is it?”

Saruwatari suddenly declared. “I’m quitting the company.”

Top of First Inning

It was the top of the ninth inning; the score was three to three. It was a tight scenario with one out, bases loaded at a tie on the last inning. The batter

returned Saitou's pitch. The ball flew in the direction of the short-stop. It was an ordinary ground ball. It's a double-play, he thought.

The one protecting the short-stop is Xianming Lin. He was waiting for the ball around base. He lowered his glove down and made the motion to catch. His long hair pulled back into a ponytail wavered in the wind.

However, the ball did not enter Lin's glove. It passed through the narrow space between his feet and rolled towards the outfield. It was quite the opening. The runners returned home one after the other. Two made it home with ease while the left fielder retrieved the ball. With this it was five to three. They had gained the lead at last.

The runner on first base continued on to third base, but Saitou pulled himself together and looked at the next batter. Shigematsu's request was a low slider. He nodded back. He took his stance and made his pitch. The batter made his swing.

Unfortunately the ball flew towards the short stop again. It was on the course for a double-play. He sweated a little, but this time Lin caught it safely.

"Hey!"

He ran towards second base while the second-base man Zenji Banba called out to him. Lin quickly moved the ball over to his right hand and threw it at Banba.

"Ah"

However, Lin's pitch had gone astray. Banba hastily made to reach for it, but he could not get it. The ball rolled out to the outfield. During that time the runner on third made it home. The runner on first also made it all the way to third base.

"You gotta throw it good now." Banba told Lin. He seemed a bit annoyed.

Due to the short-stop's throwing error a point had been added, and the score was now six to three. There was one out, and first base and third base were occupied. The next batter flew the ball towards the short stop again. It was a powerful ground ball, but Lin stopped it with his body.

He tried to quickly throw it to second, but he was too slow. Maybe he fumbled in his hurry, but he missed again. Banba lost his balance on top of second base, but he managed to catch it and stepped on the plate. He then tried to throw it to first, but he stopped. It would not make it in time. The force-out of second base was more than enough; the double-play was prevented.

“What was you doin’?!”

Banba finally lashed out at the frequent errors. He squared his shoulders and walked over to the short stop in long strides. He reached for Lin and grabbed him by the collar.

“Makin’ no good with your misses! You messin’ with me?!” Normally he was a gentle, kindhearted man, but his personality completely changes when it comes to baseball.

“What the hell’s your problem?” Lin bore his teeth, brushing off Banba’s hand. Because his uniform was grabbed roughly, wrinkles formed on the characters TONKOTSU. “You just shut up, idiot-Ban!”

“Who’s the idiot ‘round here?!”

The two who had positions necessary as a combo started to fight on second base.

“Hey, hey, you guys,” the first-baseman Martinez forcibly separated Banba and Lin going at each other. “Stop it; we’re in the middle of a game.”

Turning his back to Banba, Lin started leveling the ground with his foot. He then sent a glance over to Saitou on the mound,

“.....Sorry.”

He placed a hand to the tip of his hat and said that in a whisper. It was rare to have Lin apologize earnestly. He also must be contemplating over it in his mind as well.

It was only recently Lin had gotten to have relations with other people. On top of always having been alone up until now, Lin was also bad at putting in good teamwork with others. When the sign for a bunt was given in his first game he was almost resentful about it, “why do I have to get out for someone

else?” Saitou considered it quite the growth for him to come out to baseball games seriously. And so he could not complain for the errors.

The humidity of June was gradually eating away at his strength, but Saitou psyched himself back up. He removed his hat and wiped away the sweat on his face. He bore with it and pitched the next ball. He wanted to end this inning somehow. He wanted to make one out quickly. He did not want it to be hit towards the short stop. Idle thoughts took over his mind. He strained himself in his haste. He put in too much power behind it, and the ball flew high. Unable to maintain control of it, he ended up giving them a walk.

The next batter managed to hit the easy straight ball in the center. The moment it was hit he knew it would be taken away; it was a critical hit. The ball flew high towards the right-field and then passed over the fence. It was a home run insuring three runs.

Desperately holding back the feeling of his heart breaking from it, Saitou faced off with the next batter. The manage to get them out with a straight pitch – a first foul for them. The Ramens long defense had finally come to an end.

For a grass-lot baseball practice match losing seven points in one inning was inexcusable. Errors made by their teammates played a part, but this was still inexcusable. As Saitou covered his head with a towel and slumped on the benches,

“Hey, Lin,” He heard an unhappy voice. It was Banba.

Lin was drinking a sports drink on the benches and made a clearly detestable expression when he was called by name. “.....What is it?”

“About before. How many times I gotta tell you to remember? Dontcha throw right at my chest.” Banba criticized Lin’s blunder. “You gotta pay attention. You even done made a stupid opening like that.”

“I couldn’t help that. It was an irregular bound.”

“Dontcha make some excuses now. Don’t I say you gotta never let your eyes off the ball ‘till the end?”

Lin was still a beginner. Besides, for a game it was just a practice game. He thought he did not have to be so critical over it, but Banba was strict on it.

Lin looked downward and whispered. “.....I’m tired of listening to you.”

“The ground was uneven, so you should’ve prepared for an irregular bound. You gotta take into consideration the condition of the ground, you -”

“Ahh, enough already!” Lin was at the end of his limit as well. He cut off Banba and yelled back. “Just shut the hell up!”

“What’s with that attitude?! I’m givin’ you some advice here!”

“Excessive advice!”

The Tonkotsu nine quickly rushed over to the two, having begun to fight once more. Shigematsu and Jiro broke in between them and separated Banba and Lin.

“Hey now, don’t fight.”

“Make up already, you two. You two are a team.”

No matter how much they bickered, they could not take back the points they lost. Nonetheless, having gotten into that situation of all the bases loaded, the mood of the team (well more specifically the two of them) took a turn for the worse. He was feeling down more and more. Saitou hung his head.

“A seven point difference, huh.” The score was ten to three. Unconcerned for how far behind they were, the coach Genzo smiled cheerfully. “Well, we’ll manage somehow.”

Even though it is not a difference where we can manage something. Just where is he getting that confidence from? Saitou does not understand.

And then Genzo clapped his hands once and suggested. “Alrighty, if any of y’all can’t get to makin’ an effort, you’re gonna get the end stick of the punishment game.”

The other eight members besides the pitcher Saitou joined in on it.

“That’s a nice idea.” The first to give their approval was their slugger Martinez. “How about the person with the least amount of base hits treat a meal to everyone?”

“Alrighty then.”

“Isn’t that rather interesting? I’m in.”

At Genzo and Martinez’s suggestions the long hitter cleanup group gave their approval cheerfully. The other Yamato frowned, “Ehhh, you serious?”

“That sort is fine once awhile.” Enokida was on board against their expectations.

“Lin has three errors, so his hits start from minus three.”

“Haa? Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? You caused quite the trouble for the team.” Jiro smiled. “Isn’t this fine? You are the lead batter this inning, so you can get the most turns.”

He seemed to have felt responsibility for his errors, and he did not say anything back in a retort. “Damn it,” he let that out and then got up from the benches. He put on the helmet and made his preparations.

It was the offensive and defensive switch. Bottom of the ninth inning the Ramens offense began. The first batter Lin entered the batter’s box and held up the bat.

The pitcher made his throw. The first pitch was a straight ball. It was an easy ball right in center, but whether he could not do it or he did not feel like hitting it, but Lin calmly let it pass him. The second pitch was a dropped ball. The ball bounced once in front of the umpire. It was an apparent bad ball. But Lin responded. He matched the timing of the ball hitting the ground and bouncing back up to skillfully hit it. The ball grazed past the pitcher’s glove and flies towards center field.

Everyone on the bench went wild over Lin’s wonderful play. “Did you see that? That child hit a one-bounce ball just now.”

“Hey, hey, is he Ichiro?”

“Though he let the straight ball pass, why did he go for that kind of ball?”

“Lin-chan, nice batting!” Banba yelled excitedly. Even though he was so angry just previously; he was a man who switched over quickly.

Naturally coming to the ninth inning they could begin to see the other team’s

pitcher was also getting exhausted. His ability was clearly decreasing, and the next batter, number 8 Shigematsu, hit the weak straight ball with ease. The ball flies far. It was a two run home run heading to the left field.

“How about thinking what to treat everyone?” Shigematsu smiled as he came back to the benches.

The pitcher Saitou was being exempted from the punishment game. Though there was no way he could let himself get an out while they forgive him for such a lead for his pathetic pitching. He had to contribute to the team a little bit. He at least wanted to make a one base hit or make it to base with a walk.

He stood up to the plate and took up his bat. The pitcher took his stance and threw. The white ball was coming at him. He could gradually see it get larger. Feeling it would come flying at his head, Saitou unconsciously cried out.

“Hee”

He greatly threw his head back, but the ball was easily caught by the umpire in a set area. It was an in high straight ball. It was in the striking zone. The umpire raised his hand.

This was Saitou’s weakness. Due to the trauma he had taken with a beanball to the head in a practice game last year, he could not hit inside pitches. He would step in and not be able to swing the bat. His body always dodged it on its own.

In the end two pitches were made in the same place in the inside corner, and Saitou’s turn at bat ended with three strikes he let happen.

“That was a complete in course attack, wasn’t it,” As Saitou was walking to the benches Enokida called out to him while practicing his swings among the circle of the upcoming batters. “Well, if you jump back like that of course your weakness would be let out.”

“I’m sorry for not being of any help.....”

“Don’t worry about it, don’t worry about it.”

Enokida headed for the batter’s box. As they were passing each other, he placed a hand on Enokida’s shoulder.

“Whoaa, they came out in front of the outfield.” Seeing the garrison formation, the ends of Enokida’s lips curved upward. “Think they’re underestimating me?”

It was Enokida’s turn at bat. He swung the air missing the first pitched ball, a slider. Even when watching from the benches, it seemed he did not match the timing of it at all. The second pitch was also the same as the first: a slider. It entered the strike zone a bit more than last time. Enokida bore his white teeth. Here it is, that was his expression. He twisted his thin body and made a powerful swing. For the fast runner type, it was a rare full swing from Enokida. He tossed the bat away and made a dash for first base fluidly. The ball flew high towards right field. It made a huge arch. It was not coming down. With the assistance of the wind, it then disappeared over the fence. It was a home run.

“My, it got in.” Enokida after running around the bases made it back to home plate while grinning all the while. He returned to the benches and made a high five with the nine members.

“Hey, hey, so even you can make a home run?”

“You missed the first one on purpose. You were aiming for a slider.”

“Are y’all against the punishment game that much?” Genzo slumped his shoulders.

“I’m just a guy who hates losing.”

With Enokida’s solo home run, one point had been added. It was ten to six. They were four points behind.

The next batter, number 2 Yamato, also made it on base with a hit in front of center field. The Ramens Nine’s fierce offense pushed on.

The third batter Banba had a hit in front of right field.

The fourth batter Martinez had a powerful hit towards the short stop. And then the short stop had a throwing error to second base. In that time they scored one point, and the runners moved to the next base. And so they had one out, and a runner on second base and a runner on third base. The score was ten to seven.

The fifth batter up next was Jiro.

“Jiro-chan, good luck!” The elementary school student Misaki jumped up from sitting between the benches and gave her support.

“Fufu, leave it to me. I’ll give it my all.” Jiro smiled back to her and entered the batter’s box. Immediately after he made a full swing while yelling in an intimidating voice, “dorasshaa!” The ball he hit managed to fly over the heads of the left-wing players, allowing for a two RBIs. Jiro made it to the second base and made a triumphant pose.

The next batter was number six, Saeki. It was the sixth pitch persisting as a foul from the fifth. The ball once more fell along the first-base line. Everyone thought it was a foul ball, but the first-base umpire’s decision was that it was fair. The first baseman caught it and stepped on the base. It was an out.

Banba was furious, unsettled with the verdict. “That was completely a foul right there!”

“It can’t be helped. It’s an umpire hired by the other team.”

“Let’s just finish this game and go home quickly.”

They now had gotten two outs with this. The batting order was back to Lin again.

“Lin, we’re counting on you! Get at them!” Cheers come from the benches.

“At this rate the punishment game is going to be on you!” There is also jeering.

The ball the pitcher threw was a charged ball that slipped from his fingers. It flew up at the height of Lin’s head. The umpire reached out to try and catch it. Anyone watching would undoubtedly see it as an unfair ball, yet Lin swung the bat. And he hit it. It was rough, but Lin excelled at running.

“It’s always the hard ones to hit.” Admired voices rise from the benches as well. “He hit that well. That sort of shitty ball.”

Banba was joyous and clapping his hands in excitement. “Nice, Lin-chan! Nice run!”

With Lin’s safe infield hit, they were hanging by a thread. Shigematsu was hit

by the pitched ball. With this the bases were all loaded. The other team's infields were gathering at the mound.

"Now then, the next batter -"

The gazes of his teammates all moved towards him, and his anxiety spiked. Next was the ninth batter Saitou.

Saitou had been cheering his comrades on from the benches until now, but he did not expect his turn at bat to come around again. And with one point behind, two outs with full bases – a chance for a complete turn around with a single swing.

However, the other team had realized Saitou's weakness. Due to his greatest weakness of being so scared of inside pitches from his trauma to the head he could not hit. If Saitou stood up there like this and they throw continuous inside pitches it would end with three strikes. That was a conclusion anyone could predict.

The game resumed, and Saitou took up his bat at the batter's box. The umpire's request was an inside pitched straight ball just as he thought. The ball quickly approached him. It was coming at Saitou. That was the sensation that passed through his head. Saitou's body responded to the inside balls and greatly jerked back. The umpire called a strike.

"Time!"

Suddenly Genzo stood up from the benches. He beckoned for Saitou and called him over.

What does he plan to do? When he rushed over to the benches,

"Saitou-kun, good work you put out there," Genzo put his hand gently on Saitou's shoulder. "Leave the rest to me."

"Eh?" Leave it to me? What does he mean?

Genzo proudly states in front of the dazed Saitou.

"Pinch-hit with me."

Everyone on the bases and in the benches, and all of the Tonkotsu Nine were taken aback by the coach's words.

“Eh”

“Hey, hey, you serious?”

“You’re kidding.”

Ignoring the flustered Nine, Genzo put on a helmet and began to make practice swings. He appeared to seriously intend to bat.

Words to try and stop him come from the benches.

“This isn’t a senior league! Don’t overdo it!”

“That’s right, you’re not young anymore!”

“Dontcha be ridiculous now,” Genzo huffed. “I’m still young.”

“All the elderly say that!”

“No matter how you look at it you’re an old man!”

“I always got an old lookin’ face since I was born.”

No matter how much they tried to stop him, Genzo was persistent.

While the Tonkotsu Nin watch, Genzo confidently entered the batter’s box. And then he took up the bat. It was a pinch-hit with no balls and one strike. The pitcher threw the second ball, and Genzo swung hard. The swing had a trait to it as though his age was not affecting him, but it did not even graze the bat and was caught in the umpire’s mitt. It was a missed strike. They had been driven into a corner.

“Weren’t you just completely slow at swinging it?”

“It’s pointless.”

“Three strikes, three strikes.”

Everyone in the benches had given up. It was then.

The third pitch was thrown. It was the same as the last one: a straight ball. It was the same course. Genzo swung hard again. Just as they thought he would miss again, this time he perfectly matched the timing.

There was the metallic pitch that could wake someone up.

“.....Are you serious?”

Someone whispered.

The Tonkotsu Nine dashed out of the benches and watched the whereabouts of the ball dumbfounded. The white ball flew high in the sky, passed over the fence towards the right field, and then further flew all the way to the parking lot. It was a critical hit in which the moment it was hit they knew it was a home run. The other team's pitcher was hanging his head, standing on the mound.

"He took it away in the opposite direction.....what insane power he has, that old man." It was a surprisingly greater distance than the team's fourth player made.

It was an impossible pinch-hit ending home run with bases loaded. At the end of the strong offense of the batters, the coach's one swing settled the game.

Bottom of First Inning

[The ball flew towards the right field! This is big! Will it make it? Will it make it!? It made it! It's a game-ending home raaaan!]

".....Haa? You're kiddin'."

Saruwatari was dumbfounded at the announcer's yell he can hear from the radio. He got irritated bit by bit and kicked the front seat a few times. "Fuckin' hell!"

The annoyed face of the taxi driver was reflected in the rearview mirror. Saruwatari reclined back into the back seat and clicked his tongue loudly. *Damn. Even though it was just one more out.*

Trying to be more conserved, he cursed to himself. ".....Just the hell is the pitcher doing?"

[The Giants have made a splendid victory with a pinch-hitting offensive! The BayStars were unable to accomplish their ninth consecutive win!]

It was the end of the month of June when the Professional Baseball Interleague Season ended and the general pennant race restarted. It was the game with the first and second place teams at Tokyo Dome, the BayStars versus the Giants. The last inning had the team take four points with the incredible

confusion done thanks to the iron wall that is their relief pitcher, regardless of the five point lead. The new pitcher for the prolonged game was unable to keep that one point deference.

It was not rare for the game to suddenly change with one hit in the confined Tokyo dome. Along with being cornered with three strikes, they also were bombarded with straight balls. It was the worst.

Naturally he was upset the team he supported had lost. And it was not even a normal lose either. Saruwatari hated the words “walk-off game” the most in this world. And he hated the term “game-ending home run” even more. His frustration did not lighten up a bit. He felt like there was a haze in his heart. He was vexed.

Usually at times like this he would kill some people and let off some steam, but he had just decided he would do any killings in Tokyo anymore.

[This is live from the booth. It is the hero interview.] He heard the reporter speak. [The hero of today is of course this fellow here! The pinch-hitter who made the game-end home run -]

“Oi,” he turned to the driver’s seat and addressed him. “Turn off the radio will ya.”

“O-okay,” the driver replied in fear and immediately turned off the power to the radio.

He moved his gaze to the outside of the window and looked at the streets of Shinjuku. He was born and raised in Kitakyushu and had lived in Yokohama for three years. Since then he had always been living in Tokyo, but it was time to say farewell to this city as well.

Saruwatari suddenly thought of his grandfather. He was from Shimonoseki and was a major fan of the Taiyo Whales. He was also an experienced baseball player and had coached for high school baseball before too. It was his grandfather who had taught him how to play baseball when he was in elementary school as well. It was his influence that Saruwatari supported the BayStars.

It seemed his grandfather had also aimed to become a professional baseball

player when he was younger, but having to give it up due to injuries he entrusted that dream to Saruwatari. At his grandfather's strong recommendation Saruwatari transferred to a veteran school in Yokohama instead of his local high school. It was a study abroad for baseball so to speak. Saruwatari had spent his youth absorbed in baseball, but in the end he did not fulfill the dream of becoming a professional; perhaps there was a mishap down the line somewhere, but now he made a living by killing people.

After some time he arrived at his destination. "I don't need them change." He handed over a ten thousand yen bill and got out of the taxi. He looked up at the pure black building towering over the office city. It was a building of Murder Inc Saruwatari worked for. The entrance was firmly locked. After holding up his employee ID the security latch unlocked, and Saruwatari stepped inside.

The third discussion upon entering this season was being held in a small conference room. His superior was sitting in front of Saruwatari. He was around his mid-thirties, his bangs parted smoothly, and he seemed like a nervous type of man at first glance. His hair had a black luster to it from using too much product.

"I have said it many times now, but it is a big problem for us." His superior says and pushed up his glasses with his middle finger. "You quitting."

It was last year's New Year's Eve when Saruwatari decided to quit the company. Although he had sent in his letter of resignation, it had been put off countless times and a half year had dragged by.

"Your record against other killers is 24 encounters with 24 wins. You are a killer with no loses; an ace of the Murder Inc Tokyo home branch. You are the largest earner for our company, so we cannot allow you to quit so easily. We are low on people as of right now."

Saruwatari tutted at his superior's words. *The reason you guys are low on workers in the first place is your fault isn't it? You send off incapable employees to other branches because you hate taking responsibility for them. Who do you think has to go through all the trouble for shifting the blame like that?* His dissatisfactions from the first day he started here boiled up, and Saruwatari glared at his superior's face.

“Can’t be helped when you leave it all to me.” He was going to quit. He did not care what his superior thought of him, Saruwatari gave a retort back with an impudent attitude. “Since you don’t properly train the newbies.”

“.....Anyway,” his superior exhaled out quietly. He was making a composed expression, but he could see he was desperately pushing down his anger. “Your work is acknowledged by the president as well, and we’ll put down as much as you want to keep you. Won’t you reconsider?”

“No way.”

“I think your earnings will greatly increase from what you have now.”

“1,500,000,000 for three years plus shares.” The corners of his mouth curled up into a grin at the statement, and he stated. “If you say you can offer that I can think it over.”

His superior glared back. It was the hateful expression screaming, *how dare you taking advantage of this.*

“It’s a joke.” It was not like Saruwatari wanted to make a fuss over wages. It was not an issue about money. “No matter how much you offer, I’ll still quit.”

I don’t have anymore enemies here (Tokyo). Even if I work for this company it won’t feel worth doing it. I can’t smolder away here. To kill killers I need to aim for their habitat. Saruwatari hardened his resolve.

“So you quit and then what?”

“I’ll do freelance work.” He was not aligned for working for a company anyway. “I’ll go back to my home.”

As long as he had his strength, he would get approached anywhere. He would be well demanded by various organizations. Request after request would fly in, and he would be more busy than his time in this company. There was no doubt that sort of future would await him. Saruwatari thought that so,

“There is no way a nameless killer like you would be able to eat under freelancing.”

He could not ignore his superior’s declaration.

“.....What do you mean by that?”

“But isn’t this true? You’ve been getting jobs up until now because of the company’s name. It’s not because of your strength. If you leave the company, you’ll just be a nameless killer.”

“Even without a name, I got a record.” He should be recognized right away.

“How naive. Having a few accomplishments in this world won’t help you at all. It’s really only just you with confidence in yourself. Just that won’t do.”

“You’d just be mortified if I manage to get away, so please cut it with the sore loser act.”

“I’m not being a sore loser; it’s a warning. What is vital in this industry is a name and connections. Unfortunately for you, you don’t have either.”

Saruwatari scowled. *What warning. How arrogant. This pisses me off.*

“I won’t care if you come to regret it,” his superior snorted. “Our company doesn’t rehire anyone.”

Saruwatari stood up vigorously and kicked over a nearby chair. A loud crash resounded in the quietened conference room. He never broke the habit of hitting something when he was frustrated from his high school years. “I’m fed up with talking, so give up the severance money already.”

“Stop doing drugs before a job.”

This was the third time he has said this now. And yet Yamamoto would needlessly retort back and dismiss it, “it’s just pot, so it’s fine.”

What ‘it’s just pot’ crap, Abe was exasperated. Though a dried plant with synthetic cannabinoid in it similar to what cannabis had could not be called just pot.

The cigarette Yamamoto was holding in his mouth had the leaf part scraped out with an illegal cannabis stuffed inside there. He warned him countless times to cut off from the drugs, but each time Yamamoto would just laugh, “Without this my hands shake and it’d impair me for work.”

A white van was parked on a one lane street in the center of Hirao. Their destination was the third floor of the five story building on the other side of the narrow street. They looked up at the black brick building. From the window on

the third floor there was no light on. It appeared to be vacant. All the other windows on the floor had a paper reading taking 'tenant applications' in them. If the gang's office is in the same building I guess they could not find any renters, Abe thought.

"Seems those yakuza folk aren't back yet." His partner who was sitting in the passenger's seat, Yamamoto, said. "What will we do?"

Abe and Yamamoto both wore overalls. Abe was wearing a hat, and Yamamoto had a white towel wrapped around his head. At first glance they looked like ordinary blue-collar workers, but they actually go by the name of killers. The two of them were a pair of killers.

"I'm going to go buy coffee," Abe said while opening the car door. "Keep watch on the building. Tell me exactly how many come back."

Yamamoto replied back stupidly at Abe's order, "Allllriiight." *Is it really alright to have this man keep watch? He won't do anything again while I look away right?* He was anxious.

After Abe bought a can of coffee to energize himself at a nearby convenient store he returned to the car briskly. He asked him while opening the driver's side door. "How was it? Was there any movement?"

Yamamoto nodded. "They came back."

"Really?"

"They went in the building just now."

He looked up at the mentioned building. A light turned on on the recently pitch black third floor. Just as Yamamoto said it appeared their targets finally arrived.

"Their numbers?"

"There were five."

"That so."

Abe moved around to the back of the car and opened the trunk. He took out a gun equipped with a sound suppressor on it from inside. It was an automatic handgun made by a German company he had been using for many years now. It

was plastic reinforcement, so it was lighter than the naked eye would expect and it was easier to wield. He pulled the slide. The amount of ammo was full with fourteen shots. His targets were five people, so it was enough to shoot two for each, but he grabbed two machine guns prepared just in case.

Yamamoto also got out of the car. He was walking a bit unsteadily because of the drugs, and Abe felt his anxiety peek again after the hundredth time. He put on his ski mask and tossed over the other to Yamamoto.

“You know the conditions the client gave right?”

When he asked him Yamamoto looked up at the building. He made a blissful expression and pointed to the third floor. “We kill all the men on that floor – that right?”

“No.”

Even though he explained it already, just how bad is this guy's memory? He was on the end up his rope. “They said it's alright to kill them, but you can't kill all of them.”

Their client's instructions were as follows: there would be a Yakuza meeting in the middle of the night tonight in a small office on the third floor of this building. It seems it was just a meager gathering with the people in the inner circle. Watch the office until that time, infiltrate in and shoot at the yakuza inside. There was no need to kill them, but they would not care if they had them killed if they put up a resistance. The difficulty was not that high, but as a job for a killer to receive it was slightly odd.

There were two strange conditions to this job. One was to leave one person alive for certain among the people in the office so there would be a witness. The other was to ask the witness “where is Kitaguchi?” This ‘Kitaguchi’ was apparently a person's name; it did not refer to the northern exit in this case.

“I'm jokin', I got it I said.”

Yamamoto, now with a ski-mask on, had said that. He was probably grinning stupidly underneath. Even with the mask on he knew.

“We leave one person alive and ask the question. It was ‘where's Nishiguchi,’ right?”

“It’s Kitaguchi.”

Is this guy really alright? A sigh escaped from Abe’s lips. Yamamoto was dumb and his memory was terrible. And on top of that he was a drug addict. He was a helpless idiot. *Is it because he is an idiot that he’s into drugs, or is it because he’s into drugs that he’s an idiot?*

“Don’t mess this up.”

“Mm-hm.”

They climbed up the stairs of the building with a gun in one hand and sneaked up to the office door. After he took multiple breaths and calmed his racing heart, he knocked.

“Who is it?” He heard a man’s voice.

“It is express delivery. Please provide us a signature.” When he answered that back he heard the sound of the lock unlatching. *Wow, for them to fall for such an old trick. Aren’t they too careless?*

Abe held up his gun and pulled the trigger. One shot hit the heart of the man in the black suit as he opened the door. He stepped into the room while using the body as a shield.

“Wh-who the hell are you?!”

The other stern looking men yelled. He fired in that moment of time. Before they could stand up from the sofa he rained bullets onto them. Two shots for each person. The cries mixed together. After a moment they all fell.

The five men groan while groveling on the ground. To ask the question he picked the young man with the least amount of wounds that still was conscious.

“Hee,” when he grasped him by the head the man shouted. “D-don’t kill me!”

“Hey,” Yamamoto asked. “Where’s Nishiguchi?”

“.....It’s Kitaguchi.”

After Abe whispered it to his ear, Yamamoto corrected himself. “Where’s Kitaguchi?”

“K-Kitaguchi-san is,” the man replied. The man’s jaw shook bit by bit out of

fear and his teeth were chattering. "He'll be late from another job, they said."

Shooting the man in the foot as so he could not pursue, the young man shouted again. They managed a surprise attack at the office and relayed the question. With this their job was done.

"We're leaving," he said, but it was when Abe turned on his heel.

From behind them he heard a small noise. He turned around. Another man appeared from the restroom.

His reaction was late from the unexpected situation. The other also had a gun and fired it. He instantly dodged it, but the bullet grazed his right hand. While grimacing, Abe fired back. He pulled the trigger aiming between the man's eyebrows. The bullet struck the man in the head. Blood and hunks of flesh splattered on the white wall behind him.

"Abe-san, you alright?" Yamamoto rushed over to him. "You're bleeding."

He had told him to call him by his alias, not his real name while on the job. Abe clicked his tongue.

They quickly left the building and went down the stairs. He took off his ski-mask and then put pressure on his wound. So the blood did not drip down he pressed it hard on it. He then glared at Yamamoto. "There were six."

"Heh?"

"You said there were five, right?"

And yet there were six people in that office.

"Ahh," Yamamoto chuckles like usual. "Sorry 'bout that, I counted wrong."

"As if that's good enough." Give me a break, he thought. He wanted to give him a punch, no, three punches into his stupid grinning face. "Since you're using drugs you made such a stupid mistake."

"Sorry."

He got into the car and braced the handles. His wound stung. When he grimaced Yamamoto looked over at him from the passenger's seat. "Is it that bad? I can switch with you."

“As if I’d be in a car with someone driving under the influence.”

He tried to bite back, but he could not put any strength into his right hand. Since the bullet only grazed him it would heal in just a few days, but right now it was difficult to drive the car. Abe reluctantly switched with Yamamoto. All that was left to do was to report that they had finished the job and to collect their reward.

They drove towards Nakasu where their mediator was. During that time Yamamoto expressively talked on and on at length. Maybe it was the excitement after finishing a job or he had gotten high because of the drugs. It was awfully depressing. Abe was frustrated. He was sleep deprived and his hand was throbbing in pain. Because of his useless partner his life was in danger again. “I’m going to sleep for a bit so shut up.” He spat out coldly and pretended to sleep. Yamamoto also quietened.

Why did I choose this stupid man as my partner. Thinking back to his foolish self half a year ago, Abe gave a small sigh. The start of it was the change in conditions for Fukuoka killers. Over the past few years the number of killers who make a pair or team to carry out jobs had increased. The common lone wolf in hard boiled movies for killers nowadays had already passed. It was certainly better to have allies.

As to not be behind on riding the wave of the new era, Abe also sought out comrades. What he found at that time was the name of an underground website called UnderGroundJobs.com Fukuoka Version. Information from underground companies were on there and various exchanges with clients were made on there. It was a website that largely developed over these few years. And when he sent out a notice for a partner the first name to appear on it was this man Yamamoto.

Yamamoto was originally not a killer, but he apparently made a living as a convenience store bugler and a purse snatcher. He was twenty-three years old and was five years younger than Abe. However, his complexion was poor and he did not seem young. The undersides of his eyes were dark and he had a lisp to his speech. Abe immediately discerned that he was a drug addict when he first met Yamamoto. And then he became nervous. *Is this man alright? Can I entrust my life to this intoxicated man as my partner?* However, the deadline for

a job he had taken was coming up. If he cut ties with him and tried to find a new partner his schedule would become rather tight. And that would be a bother. And so Abe had to team up with Yamamoto.

And their first job came to pass. Yamamoto aimed for the target with a gun, but because of the drug's effects his hand shook and missed, nearly killing Abe on the spot. On their next job Yamamoto went in with two handguns with the reason that "it's just cool." Since he held both guns at the same height the cartridge of one of them he fired from the gun hit his other hand and it bounced into Yamamoto's face. And so his shot went astray and he almost killed Abe. He got into trouble at every job because of this man's mistakes. Becoming partners with him was Abe's greatest mistake in life. Although he thought that he still kept their partnership and now with their third job as of today that was how it has been.

While he was thinking over that the car Yamamoto was driving crossed over Watanabe Street in Tenjin while going at a speed of a crawl. They stopped, caught in the red light at the intersection. They would arrive at their destination soon enough. They would finally wrap up this job. It was when he thought that.

" – Ah."

Yamamoto spoke up.

"It's the cops!"

".....Ha?" *Cops? Does he mean the police?* "What did you say?"

Yamamoto suddenly started to shout. "Behind us! The black van! It's an unmarked police car!"

Abe quickly turned back in more of a scurry than usual. He saw the driver in a minivan stopped two cars behind them. However, no matter how he looked at it it was a normal bystander. He did not see anyone that would be a police officer in the area as well.

"They must have been following us!" Yamamoto yelled. He was acting off. It was probably because of the drugs. *Again*, he thought. It was quite often that Yamamoto would be subjected to hallucinations.

He grasped Yamamoto's shoulder and soothed him. "Hey, calm down. It's

your imagination.”

“ – G-gotta get out of here.”

Yamamoto let go of the pedal. There were three lines of cars waiting for the light and each direction was blocked. Even though they were surrounded by all the cars from in front of them, behind them, and to the side of them he recklessly stepped on the acceleration pedal. He crashed into the other cars and pressed forward to make a way through the cars.

“Oh, wah”

Each time they collided with one the car shook greatly. His head swung forward and the back of his hit the seat with the recoil.

“Oww.....” Abe yelled while rubbing his head. “What the hell are you doing?!”

“What do I do, what do I do.” He did not register Abe’s voice. Yamamoto was in a state of confusion. He was muttering to himself. “Crap, crap, crap.”

This was a disaster.

Even though after finishing the job they could just give their report and go home. Why did it come to this? It is always a disaster pairing up with this man.

The drivers of the other cars that got hit are yelling at them. He saw one get out of their car and approach them. *This isn’t good.*

“Alright, just get out of here!”

When Abe yelled at him, Yamamoto smashed on the accelerator. The car lurched forward, brushed off the other driver and ran down Watanabe Street.

His home greatly changed over the past ten years. Haven just got off the shinkansen at Kokura Station, scenery he had never seen before spread out in front of Saruwatari. The fashion building behind the station lined with clothing stores popular to young people was now a subculture, commercial establishment aimed towards otaku. Famous statues of manga related to Kitakyushu were lined up on the pedestrian deck of the northern entrance of the JR Kokura Station. He had heard that Kitakyushu City is abundant with underground jobs like Fukuoka City and that there was a large population of killers as well, but it only looked like a truly peaceful city.

A few days had passed since he defied against his superior and quit the company. Haven finished with his arrangements he finally was able to return to his home place. Until he settled on a place of residence he had decided to stay at hotels. He chose a cheap business hotel two minutes on foot from the shinkansen entrance. It was a small and enclosed room, but it was enough.

Now then, what should he do. Saruwatari considered his options as he opened the curtains and looked outside his window. *Even if I go with freelancing, I first need clients. It don't matter if it's my home town, I don't got none connections in the area since I've been away for ten years. Sucks to say it but he was right in that sense.*

And so there's one option left. I gotta talk with a mediator and get jobs through them. It'll eat up the cost, but I got nothin' else. Now the issue is where can I find one.

He noticed his cell phone on the table was vibrating suddenly. It was an incoming call. The characters read Nguyen on the screen. After he pressed the accept button and put it to his ear he heard the cheerful voice of his old co-worker.

[It's been awhile, Saru.]

Since this past spring Nguyen had been moved to another station. And so the number of times they could see each other decreased and even the time eating together lessened. It had been awhile for them to converse like this.

[I heard about it. So you finally went and quit the company, have you? It's been a panic over your post.]

"Glad to hear it," Saruwatari gave a dry laugh. Thinking of the troubled face of his hateful superior put him in a good mood.

[So? What are you doing now?]

"I came back to Kokura."

[Uh-uh.] Nguyen stated happily. [I'm actually in Fukuoka right now.]

"How come?" *Why would Nguyen, a member of the main branch, be in Fukuoka? It can't be,* it dawned on him. "You got demoted?"

[No. It's for business.] Nguyen explained while laughing. [The troublesome job of the killer scouts got pushed onto me.....You know that guy Saitou, right? The rookie from last year?]

"Yeah," he recalled him immediately. "The guy sent to Fukuoka?"

That's right, Nguyen affirmed. [Seems that guy managed to ditch the company. Around winter of last year they haven't been able to contact him. They think he cut his ties' from this industry. It'd be more of a problem to bring it to the police, so they have to eliminate him right away but..... Unfortunately there wasn't enough people at the Fukuoka office so they haven't been able to find him.]

It was the end of June right now. It had been a rather long time since Saitou's disappearance. "After that long-a-time, couldn't they just let him go?"

[We can't. It involves the company's people. And to help the busy Fukuoka office I was sent out. Well, it's also within our position to eliminate company traitors.]

"It's almost like the ninja world."

He had seen something like that in some movie before. The fugitive ninja was chased down until his death for abandoning his village. And the traitor and the pursuer who had shared the same meals together when they were young would fight to the death ruthlessly. In the end of that movie the pursuer lost to his emotions and had let the fugitive go. The pursuer was executed by the villagers as a traitor. That was his harsh end.

"Will one come for me?" He asked out of sudden interest. "A pursuer of the fugitive ninja?"

If a fugitive of the company was to be executed then he was no exception. That was what he thought, but Nguyen just laughed.

[If we tried then the company would lose assets.]

It was exactly as he said. There was no killer above Saruwatari in that company. No matter how many pursuers they would send, he had the confidence he would just finish off all of them. A company already short on people would not waste their employees lives so meaninglessly.

[At any rate, until that's finished I can't return to Tokyo. So let's go for some drinks.]

Saruwatari vaguely nodded at the invitation unsure if he meant it for real or if it was just talk.

Though just now Nguyen said "killer scouts." His position in the general company was similar to a personnel office. They had mediators of each area, find and scout out for skilled killers, and bring them into the company by various means. And they had a list of looked up mediators with particular qualities.

He may be able to use this.

"Oi, Nguyen. I got a favor for ya."

[What is it?]

"Could ya send me the list of mediators in Fukuoka prefecture?"

[Eh,] Nguyen choked on his words for a moment. [.....Are you serious. If this gets out, I'll be killed for it.]

"Then don't get yourself caught."

[.....Guess I can't refuse.]

He agreed in a reluctant manner. He was told, [treat me next time,] so he had to find a nice place.

Thanks to the help of his former colleague he managed to get his first step in the right direction for freelancing. "What's important is connections," the words of his superior passed through his mind, and he felt a little bit sick at that.

Translation Notes:

1. Saruwatari is from Kitakyushu. It is a city in the northern most part of Kyushu. As such Saruwatari speaks the local dialect from there. To try and differentiate Banba's dialect and Saruwatari's dialect I based Banba's off of southern speech most specifically in Texas and Oklahoma while Saruwatari is based off the Appalachian areas.

2. Ichiro Suzuki, known commonly as just Ichiro, is a famous Japanese professional baseball outfielder.
3. Beanball – A pitch intended to hit the batter as it is thrown at the head.
Run Batted In (RBI) – A statistic that credits a batter for making a play that allows a run to be scored.
Pinch-Hit – Bat in the place of another.

Second Inning

Top of the Second Inning

Canal City Hakata, its nickname the Canal, was a commercial establishment complex lined with every entertainment and recreational facilities imaginable from clothing shops and restaurants to cinemas and theaters. Just as the term Canal suggested, a stream ran through the inside of the building and a large water fountain as well. Programs occurred frequently on the stage, and there had even been performers appearing in events and live shows there as well. It was a landmark of Fukuoka City located right next to the entertainment district of Nakasu between Tenjin and Hakata.

Enokida had been staying at the internet cafe nearby here as of late.

It was a weekday, so there were not many people visiting the Canal today. The caricature artists at the center of the basement floor all look bored. And the street stalls aligned with silver accessories and power stones all seemed to be unoccupied.

He was told by his friend, the torturer Martinez, that he needed to talk with him on the phone, so he decided to meet with him in a cafe on the first basement floor. He waited several minutes at his seat near the window while drinking his cafe au lait. He saw the dark man over 190 centimeters tall at the store's entrance.

He did not even have to raise his hand to let him know where he was. Martinez ordered an ice coffee and then found Enokida's bright colored hair right away.

"Sorry I was late."

He walked over to him and took a seat in the chair opposite to him.

"I was wondering if I got lost even though I should know better," Martinez gave a wry smile. "Why is the Canal built so complicated?"

"True, you'd think this place would be the first floor, but it's actually the first basement floor."

“Exactly. Just who made this building?”

“It seems the one who designed it was an American architect called Jon Jerde.”

“Don’t you find it hard to understand how foreigners think this up?”

“Are you really one to say that?” From Enokida’s perspective the Dominican Martinez was a legit foreigner.

“Now then, what did you want to talk about?” He said before entering the main topic right away.

“I have something I want you to look into. There was that traffic accident in Tenjin a while ago, right?”

He saw that accident on the news. “It was at the intersection on Watanabe Street if I recall. There was reckless driving, right?”

“That’s it.” He nodded before continuing. “It hit the other cars around it and drove off. I’m looking for the driver.”

“There are plenty of security cameras in that area, so I think if I can at least find the type of car and plate number, then I can figure it out from there.”

“It’d be a great help if you can.”

Martinez looked outside, and he suddenly gasped, “ah.” He seemed to have seen something on the center walkway he could see from the window.

“Hey, look.” Where he pointed was at a young woman. When he looked closer it was a familiar face. It was not a woman but a man. “Isn’t that Lin?”

“It really is.”

Lin dressed in woman’s clothing. He had makeup neatly applied, and he was passing through the center from the north side of the Canal, walking towards Hakata Station.

“What’s he doing? Shopping?”

“Probably.”

Lin had shopping bags around both his arms and was walking in a stately manner. He passed the side of the cafe without taking notice of them.

“Really though,” Martinez tilted his head in wonder. “I wonder why he always crossdresses.”

“Isn’t there a certain side to it? It satisfies him to identify with his dead sister.”

“You think so? Either way, it looks like he’s doing it out of his own enjoyment for it.”

Once he took a step out of the air-conditioned facility mucky humidity clung to his body. The last day of June in Fukuoka had the sun shining brightly and with seething heat. Even though he was wearing a cooler outfit with a T-shirt, short pants, and mule shoes he was already sweating just by walking a little bit. The large shopping bags he was carrying in his arms was eating away at his strength.

I bought a little too much, he reflected to himself. He came to Canal City to stock up on some summer clothes, but each time he would try one on he would end up liking each one of them and after fumbling over which ones he should buy he just ended up bringing all of them to the register. *It’s too bad I just look good in everything.*

After he left the Canal the monument of the venomous colored frog came into view. Ahead of that the light for the pedestrian walkway was just about to turn green. The melody to cross began to play, and the people all started to walk and cross the black and white street. Just as Lin was about to step forward in that direction his cell phone in his bag vibrated. It was an incoming call. He took it out as he was walking and placed it to his ear.

[Where are you right now?] What he heard was the voice of Banba.

“I’m in front of the Canal.”

[And the *mentaiko*?]

He suddenly recalled when he was told that. *Actually now that he mentions it, I was asked by Banba to go and buy mentaiko. That was close. If I went back empty handed, this guy would make such a fuss over it.*

[Dontcha tell me.] The tone in Banba’s voice changed. [You forgot it, ain’t that right?]

“I remember perfectly.” He completely forgot. “I was just about to go and buy it.”

[How long you gonna make me wait. Hurry up and get it already.]

“Shut up. Can’t you wait half a day?” *This mentaiko addict. Hurry up and die from taking in too much of the salt*, he cursed in his mind.

[You got it now? It’s the regular non-artificially colored one, so dontcha go an’ -]

So Banba could not finish what he was going to say Lin replied before cutting the call, “I got it!”

He had a debt to Banba. He had saved his life, and in compensation he owed five years worth of *mentaiko*. On top of that he let Lin, who had nowhere to go, live at his place. Lin had been paying his share while freeloading at the office he owned.

He purchased the designated *mentaiko* at the company shop in the station’s underground shopping center, and afterwards he came out of the Chikushi exit at Hakata Station. After walking for a bit a small building complex came into view. He could see the characters ‘Banba Detective Office’ on the third floor’s window.

When he opened the door to the office Banba stood in front of a full-length mirror topless and was in the middle of practicing some swings. He was swinging the metal bat with a full waist swing while grunting. Sweat was pouring down his upper arms and stomach, and just by looking he seemed to be sweltering. *It’s really revolting. I bought that mirror so I could check if I match my outfit right, not so you can check your batting form.* He wanted to say that, but Lin held it in.

“I told you not to practice your swinging in the middle of the room. You’re in the way. Go to a batting center.”

Banba finally noticed him when he had addressed him. “Welcome back. Where’d that *mentaiko* be?”

That’s the first thing you have to say? He is exasperated.

Alright, alright, I got it for you. He held up the Fukuya bag wordlessly. Banba’s

expression brightened up.

“A non-artificially colored?”

“Regular.”

When he answered it like one would with a password, Banba gave a satisfied grin. “Correct!” But then his complexion immediately changed, and he pointed over to Lin’s handbags. “What’s that mountain of bags you got there?”

“What do you expect? They’re clothes. They had a sale at the Canal.”

“.....You wasted money again.”

“What does it matter to you? It’s with the money I had saved up.”

“But you don’t need so many of them clothes.”

“I need them.” He whipped back with a scowl. “And exactly how many baseball gloves have you bought? Just how many arms you think you got? Are you a spider or something?”

“It’s all part of utilities.” Banba boasted. “I got them infielder one and an outfield one, and a first-base mitt and a catching mitt. All of them got different uses.”

“And my clothes all have different uses. Like ones for work and ones for private.”

“All them look the same to me.....” Banba said as he began to dig through the contents of the bags. He was inconsiderately putting his sweaty hands into the lovely designed shopping bag.

“Hey, don’t touch that with your filthy hands. Go wipe off the sweat.”

“.....What’s this cloth? A towel? That’s perfect, can I use this to wipe them off?”

“It’s not a towel, it’s a shawl! Don’t!”

He quickly went to make a grab for it, but Banba kept up his teasing. This time he pulled out a hair band with a large ribbon on it from the bag and wrapped it around his head.

“Whatcha reckon’? Does it look fine on me?”

The pink ribbon was buried into his greasy, ruffled hair.

“Stop it, it’ll get dirty!” He reached out to take it back, but he could not reach the man’s head with a height difference of fifteen centimeters.

Banba took a look at himself in the mirror and nodded in approval. “.....It sure looks fine on me.”

“It does not!”

He was at the end of his patience. Lin took the metal bat and swung it. “Give it up already, you bastard!”

“Wah,” Banba bent backwards. “That was too close.”

“I’ll beat you to death!”

“A bat ain’t somethin’ to hit people with!” Banba rushed to the sofa, reached out and grabbed a cushion on it. It was a cheap cushion Lin used for a pillow when he slept. He used that to block the attacks. However it was a one-sided defensive battle. “It’s for giving hopes and dreams to people!”

“Shut up!”

“Treat the tools with care!”

“Then stay put and let me hit you!”

The clash between the metal bat and the cushion went on, and the room became a complete mess with objects and the desk fallen over.

Banba received a swing with all its force. The cushion that took the blow dropped to the floor. He sidled up to the unarmed Banba and swung the metal bat down towards his head. Banba stopped the bat, catching it between his hands.

It was then. They heard the door opening quietly.

“Ah.”

Lin and Banba froze in place with him still holding the bat between his hands. They both turned towards the entrance of the office.

There stood an unknown woman to both of them. They could not feel any particular killing intent off of her, so it did not seem to be a surprise attack from

a killer. The woman looked at both Banba and Lin and blinked her eyes multiple times.

“.....Um.” The woman asks in fear. “Is the Banba Detective Office here?”

An unexpected client has come to the detective office open year round.

“Yes.” Banba answered her. “I am the head, Banba.”

“Th-thank you.....” The woman stared at the half-naked man with a ribbon on his head with an expression that could not quite be put to words.

After Banba tossed off the hair band and put on a T-shirt, he smiled pleasantly. “My apologies. Please, come this way.”

The woman headed inside as instructed. She was looking around the room in apprehension. The Banba Detective Office was divided in half due to a partition, separating the living space and the reception area. When she spotted the mountains of trash and laundry scattered around on the partition side, the woman’s complexion changed. It was one of regret, saying she had come to a strange place.

“Please, take a seat.” After instructing the client, he addressed Lin. “Lin-chan, get some tea.”

“Haa? Why do I have to?”

“Just get it, quickly now.”

Lin reluctantly went to get the glasses from the cupboard. Clients rarely came so each glass had been left unused for a long time and were covered with dust. *I better wash these first. What a pain in the ass.* He slumped his shoulders and headed to the sink.

Banba spoke from the other side of the partition. “Now then, what is your request?”

The woman was silent for a while. After a moment she stated in a small voice. “.....I would like for you to investigate into my husband’s affair.”

“ – Speaking about Lin,” Martinez removed the glass left half filled with coffee from his lips and changed the topic. “That was pretty bad. Our previous game.”

“Yeah,” Enokida nodded in agreement with the straw kept in his mouth. “He had three blunders, didn’t he.”

He let a ball roll by, had a throwing error, and even fumbled. He had a truly bad play. He wondered how they managed to win with that.

“When those two’s coordination is bad it pulls me away too. Thanks to that I feel I’ll be making errors too.”

“So it isn’t just because you suck?”

“Shut it. Outfielders should keep their mouths shut.”

He nearly inhaled the cafe au lait down his throat. “Well I would like it if they didn’t start fighting in the middle of a game.”

You’re telling me, Martinez was in an agreement with him. “The tournament is around the corner too. If they keep doing that the opponent will laugh at us.”

“Is our team the only one with two players that can’t manage a double-play?”

“I would like them to have a play with them coordinating well together. Like Randy and DJ.”

“Who are they?” They were player names he had never heard of before. “Are they from the major league?”

“They are the protagonists of a foreign novel.”

“Mar-san, you read light novels?” He was surprised. He never expected to hear the topic of literature from this man. He could not imagine a hearty man like him quietly reading a book. Enokida laughed teasingly. “It’s probably a gay novel, right?”

“You don’t know it? Peter Lefcourt’s *The Dreyfus Affair: A Love Story*.”

“You certainly follow through on my expectations.”

“Don’t mess with me. That’s the name of the work.” Martinez said sullenly. He then explained in detail. “Randy is a star player as a shortstop. He has a wife and even kids, but he starts dating the second baseman DJ on the same team as him. And it then gets let out to the public, and they get into a tough situation being discriminated against by the other teammates and being booed by their

fans. And they receive harsh treatment from the opposing team. In one match the other team's catcher insulted Randy. He called him by provocative names and then purposefully threw the ball straight at him. There were no outs and he was the runner on third base. What do you think Randy did?"

Enokida tilted his head curiously. "As if I'd know."

"He managed to steal home." Martinez said in excitement. "Even though there were no outs, he made it to home plate. He rammed into the spiteful catcher who insulted him and his lover and had thrown the ball purposefully at him. He didn't care if he succeeded in stealing the plate or not. He only thought of knocking down that catcher. Randy slammed the 225 pound guy over and raised his fist. 'You learned your lesson now, you bastard?' Like that."

That was like him right? Martinez said excitedly. *I guess so,* Enokida consented with a suitable reply.

"More importantly about that hit-and-run case."

Martinez pouted when he tried to change the topic back to work. "And just like that.....you're a boring guy, you know? How about enjoying idle chat a bit more? You'll lose friends this way."

"I don't have the time for that." It was principle for an informant like him to listen carefully to people's conversations, but he had errands piling up after this meet up. He also had an appointment to meet with another client later that night.

"Why are you looking for the guy who did the hit-and-run?"

"I'm helping Jiro. Avenger stuff."

Avengers were, as the name implies, people who carried out vengeance. Their motto was 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' and overkill was taboo. For someone who had made three shots with a gun they only gave three shots back. They did not make any more attacks than that. They bestow the same pain onto the one who had afflicted that to someone. That was Jiro's policy.

"They got a request from the man who got hit by that car in the accident. They said they wanted to be avenged for having their brand new vehicle demolished."

Most requests that came Jiro's way were from victimized families who had their lovers or family members killed. It was a fairly rare case for him to receive a traffic accident related one.

"They're busy and don't seem to have time for it. And so I ended up taking the job in their place."

".....Since you're off of work at the moment."

He sent him a pitiful glance. Martinez's large body slumped, and he gave a sigh. "That's exactly it."

"Torturers aren't making much, right?"

"More or less. There's been a bunch of weak guys. They spit out the information without having to be tortured for it, so our work isn't necessary." Martinez complained. "I got a job after a long time just recently, but it got cancelled right away. The client was from some small yakuza group. Guess they had one of their subordinates betray their group and they ran. They caught one of the guys close to him to get the information on his whereabouts out of him. And so they called me up.....But the guy lost his nerve and told them of his location before I got there."

Pathetic isn't it? Martinez slumped his shoulders.

"If you advertise more you could get an increase in jobs? Put out an ad."

"I don't have that kind of money."

"Then there's an easy way."

Enokida took out his laptop from his bag. After he connected to the network and opened up a certain website he faced the screen towards Martinez. UndergroundJobs.com Fukuoka Version was displayed in the center of the screen in big characters.

".....Underground jobs? What's this?"

"In short, it's an underground website. It's the most active site in Fukuoka right now. If you write up a post on the job applications page it'll help in advertising."

"Seems like we've gotten into an age where everything can be solved on the

net.”

Enokida nimbly typed on the keyboard. ““Do you want to get information out of someone?! Do you want them to suffer?! Do you want them to hurt?! I’ll answer to any of your needs. A cheap torturer will be sent. Quotes are free via e-mail.’ How is something like this?”

““Your first time will be 50% off.’ Add that too.”

“Okay~”

Guess I should get going then. It was just as Martinez stood up.

“Ah, that’s right. I’ll give this to you too.” Enokida took out a new device from his skinny jean’s pocket. “The redback spider model transmitter listening device, version 2.0.”

Martinez tilted his head in confusion. “Version 2.0? How is it different than the previous one?”

“ – An affair, you say?”

The woman nodded after Banba asked that. “Yes. He seems to be meeting up with women somewhere.....I would like you to look into it.”

“Meeting up with women, huh.....” After he muttered this Banba raised his voice. “Lin-chaan. Is the tea ready yet?”

“Shut it!” *I’m not your secretary.* Lin shoved the cup of tea towards the client while cursing that under his breath. “Here you go! Regular tea!”

The contents splashed over a bit the instant he placed it on the table so roughly. Banba chuckled while wiping it up with a tissue. “My apologies. He has not had a proper upbringing.”

Lin huffed as he turned away before sitting next to Banba and crossed his legs.

According to their sudden guest’s, Kumiko Izuku’s story, her husband Tadafumi is a rather normal company employee. Kumiko is thirty-three, and Tadafumi is thirty-one years old. They have been married for four years and have had no children. Kumiko has been supporting her husband as a housewife.

However about a half year ago there was an irregularity to her husband's behavior.

"He is always late coming home."

He should be leaving work at nine in the evening at latest, yet there were multiple times he came home past the early hours of four o'clock in the morning. Whenever she asked for a reason she always gets, "I was with a fellow co-worker," or "I couldn't turn down a client's offer." There was even an increase of times of him leaving home saying he had business trips. Kumiko, feeling doubtful, checked their room while her husband was out. And that was when she made her discovery.

"This was in the desk drawer....."

Kumiko handed over several business cards to Banba. They had Club.Eve and a woman's name written on each of them. From the looks of them, all were night club business cards.

"He has been late because he frequently been visiting this club."

And what of it? Lin whispered to himself while stifling a yawn. "It's not that big of a deal hanging out at a cabaret club, right?"

"It's three days a week? That's abnormal!"

That was far too often. It passed the category of spending time with associates at work. *This isn't for the hostesses right? But where could the money come for that?* Kumiko managed their monthly wages thoroughly. Her husband had about 50,000 yen a month to spend however he wanted. Kumiko becoming even more anxious just could not handle it anymore. So she then made her next course of action.

"I looked at my husband's cell phone."

".....You're kidding me." Lin made an apparent unimpressed expression. *Even though they're husband and wife is it really alright to do that? To hell with privacy I guess.*

"There are many names of women registered under his contacts."

Banba tilted his head. "Many names of women?"

“Aiko, Kaori, Maki.” Kumiko began to cite each of the girls’ names. *Does she have them all memorized in syllabary order?* He was impressed. “Miyu, Yuri, Reina.....And just in case, I have all their numbers as well.”

“Jeez.” Lin thoughtlessly spoke out loud. “Of course that’d make him want to cheat.” When he whispered that Banba quickly smacked him on the head.

“Have you asked your husband about this club?”

“No, not at all.” Kumiko shook her head in denial. “However, I was concerned and I went to that club.”

“Whoa, you really went that far?” Lin was shocked. To go to such lengths that has to be depressing or something.

“Did you enter the club?”

“No. So my husband wouldn’t leave right away, I hid nearby and watched. And sure enough my husband appeared. Two young women came out of the club. They got into the car and took off somewhere.”

Kumiko stated, “these are the photos from then.” She handed them to him. Each of the photos showed the man and women harmoniously together.

“.....How about you quit being a housewife and become a detective?” He mentioned that next. Banba glared him down with an expression saying ‘don’t say something ridiculous.’

“I thought of getting into a taxi and following them, but I didn’t have the will to from the shock of it all, so I just went home.”

“I am sure it must have been hard for you to see that.” Lin snorted because of how Banba said that so insincerely.

“If my husband is really cheating or what his relationship is with the women.....I want to know the truth. Please, can you look into it?”

How foolish, Lin thought. She should already know that her husband is just not into her. She just probably can’t accept the truth without definite evidence. She’s believing in any possibility despite her doubt towards her husband. What a troublesome woman.

“I will accept. Would two weeks be alright for the investigation period?”

Kumiko nodded her approval. After inquiring for the details about the investigation methods and costs from start to finish she signed the documents.

“Alright so in two weeks from now on July 14th I will give you my report for the results of the investigation.”

Banba informed her.

Kumiko finished with the legal formalities and bowed her head towards Banba before leaving the office. Lin sighed as he watched her back from the window.

“You don’t even have to do any investigation crap.” He can get why he came to cheating with a wife like that. “He’s guilty. Completely guilty.”

“I reckon’ about that.” Banba seems to believe in the husband’s innocence. “Dontcha think it’s strange?”

“Strange?” He did not really think there was anything off. “Strange where?”

“The contact list. There was too many women’s names.”

“Didn’t he just cheat with a bunch of women? Her husband is still around his thirties, so his sexual needs are still pretty high.”

“Dontcha reckon’ investing money for a hostess he’d just be into one girl?” Though he asked him that, for Lin who had never payed for a hostess or had been interested into a particular woman it was a question he had difficulty answering. “Like hell I’d know. You speaking from experience?”

“There are too many business cards.”

There were different names on each of the three business cards Kumiko brought. On one there was ‘Maki,’ the second one had ‘Yuri’, and the third had ‘Aiko.’ They matched with the names Kumiko recited like a spell earlier.

Aside from the women’s names on the business cards their e-mail addresses and telephone numbers were listed along with the name of the facility Club.Eve and its address.

Seeing that Banba was taken aback. “This Eve place.....”

“You know it?”

Even though he asked Banba did not reply. Instead he began to make a call

somewhere. “Ahh, hello? Yamato-kun?”

Yamato was the name of a young male acquaintance of his. He was a man who specialized in little tricks and made a living off as a pickpocket. Lin had been a victim of his in the past too before. He was skilled at what he did, but he could not eat off of that so he worked as a host as a side job.

“You know somethin’ ‘bout a club called Eve? Ain’t that an affiliated store of yours?” The club Yamato works at should be Adams though. “Ah, so that is the case. You know the owner? Then I got a favor for ya.....I got someone who wants to work at Eve, so can you introduce them so they can get ‘em hired?”

Yamato appeared to be at a disagreement as Banba pressed on with his request. After a few minutes the other seemed to finally cave in. Banba ended the call with a, “thank you.”

“He said it is fine.” Banba turned around towards Lin and gave him a smile. “Ain’t that good?”

“Ha?”

Good? What could be ‘good’ for him?

As he made a dumbfounded expression Banba gave him a thumbs-up. “Good luck there, Lin-chan.”

Bottom of Second Inning

“ – What did ya say?” Saruwatari glared down the woman in front of him.

“Like I said,” The woman repeated back in a bothersome manner while wiping down the counter. “We can’t hire you.”

He made the attempt at contacting the mediators in Kitakyushu from the list he received from Nguyen. However, there were no mediators who were willing to lend an ear to him, and every one of them turned him away.

The last building was a darts bar called Lady Madonna in Konya city of the Kokura northern ward in Kitakyushu. The owner seemed to mediate jobs to killers. Lady Madonna quietly set up its store in an especially non-conspicuous place in this neighborhood aligned with nighttime establishments like cabaret clubs, brothels, and host clubs on the streets. It was an indecent bar like ones in

America's bad neighborhoods. There was a lack of uniformity with the brightly light red and blue neon lights. Several young people were playing at the three dartboards in the building.

For employees there was one woman at the counter. She appeared to be the owner. Her face and figure was that of a punk female. She had red-dyed long hair parted straight through the middle. She was wearing a corset camisole top and had spider tattoos on both of her bare shoulders. She was beautiful, but the heavy eye-liner surrounding her eyes gave off a strong impression that she was unapproachable.

Unlike the previous mediators, this female owner at least felt like hearing Saruwatari out. Saruwatari explained his circumstances to her and asked for help in getting work his way, but the woman rejected that instantly, "that's impossible."

Not able to accept it he pressed for the reason behind it. "And why you says that?"

"Well," the woman put a cigarette in her mouth and lit it. "You have never done any jobs in this city before, right?"

Just as the woman stated he had never done a job in Kitakyushu before. Saruwatari's debut was in Tokyo, so he had only carried out jobs given to him in the Kanto region.

"I been employed by Murder Inc. for seven years."

"Murder Inc.?Ahh, I've heard of the rumors once." The woman ridiculingly said while blowing out the white smoke. "They're that company that will employ anyone if they even write their name in the company entrance exam, right?"

The woman made an amused smile when Saruwatari's expression turned to one of offense. *What an annoying woman. She's makin' fun of me. That bitch.* Saruwatari clicked his tongue.

"Without being introduced by someone else I can't quite hire a nameless killer. Now then, go home already. You're interfering with my work." The female told him while making a swiping motion with her hand as though to

chase away a fly. His pride would not forgive him for backing down after being treated like that of course. The door slammed shut when Saruwatari left.

He sighed while walking down the street to the hotel he was staying at. It was a total loss. Even though he had gotten the list of mediators in the end he was not hired anywhere.

However, he had no other options in finding any other positions right now. He only could rely on this list. *Guess I should go out a piece tomorrow and look 'round in Fukuoka City then. This is like a salaryman searching 'round for a job with a job advertisement in his hand. This is a joke.* He walked through the Kokura Station plaza while thinking that over to himself. It was then.

“ – Hey mister over there, you sure look rather depressed.”

He heard a man's voice.

He turned towards it. There sat a young man on the bench. His age was about the same as Saruwatari's. He was wearing glasses. He had a deep blue jacket over his stripped shirt and thin necktie and was wearing eloquent white chino pants. The man was facing towards Saruwatari and was waving at him.

As if he would associate with a strange man after not finding a job. He was not lucky today.

Saruwatari turned on his heels and began to start walking again when –

“Eh? You're going to ignore me? Wait a second.”

The man followed him.

Saruwatari grimaced. *Who the hell is this guy? So creepy.* He picked up his pace in an attempt to get away from him.

Yet even so the man pursued after him.

“Aren't you mean? You shouldn't treat a friend you haven't seen in a long time like that.”

The word 'friend' catching his attention, Saruwatari immediately stopped in his tracks. Turning around again, he closely looked at the man's face.

“It's been awhile, Sarucchi.”

The man gave him a toothy grin.

He remembered him. There could only be one person who would call him 'Sarucchi.' "You're – Nao?"

"You finally remembered."

Naoya Nitta. He was one of his classmates from high school. He was from the same baseball club as him, and they were batterymates. It was a surprise for him to meet him at a time and place like this.

"What are you up to now?"

"Work. I live here now." Nitta said and smiled at him. "Since we're just standing around talking, how about we go eat at Sukesan?"

After getting off the pedestrian deck at the Kokura Station south exit and walking alongside the monorail, the Heiwadori Station came into view. Just around the entrance of the arcade in the Uomachi shopping district there was a Sukesan restaurant. It was a very familiar udon shop to the Kitakyushu residence. Saruwatari ordered *hiyashi yamakake udon*, while Nitta ordered *yaki udon*.

Though they were a battery in the same baseball club it did not mean he was particularly close with Nitta. They only associated with each other in club activities. Furthermore they have not met in the past seven years since his time in high school, so he was not sure what to talk about. Saruwatari remained quiet and slurped his noodles instead. He felt like he was nearly suffocating, completely uneasy.

".....By the way."

Nitta did not appear to feel that way however. His eyes narrowed, and he asked getting straight to the heart of the matter playfully.

"Sarucchi, you're a killer?"

"Buh" He unintentionally spat out the water he had in his mouth. He questioned back while choking over his own breath. "W-why do you kn-"

"I heard the rumors in Kokura. That a young killer is going around to all the mediators and trying to self promote himself. That's you, right?"

Nitta mentioned the term 'killer' with a calm expression. That meant this man was also part of this industry (the underground world). *Could he be the same as me?*

".....What are you?"

"I apologize for not mentioning it earlier." Nitta corrected his casual speech to a former tone. "Let me introduce myself."

He sat up straight and proper and handed over his business card. 'Killer Consultant, Naoya Nitta.'

"A killer consultant?"

"As the characters imply, I play the role of consulting assassins. That sort of thing." He explained while slurping up his udon. "All killers come to do work with various thoughts regarding it. 'I want to make good money efficiently,' 'I want to become famous,' or 'I want a job to feel the thrill.' Providing precise advice to grant each of those needs is my job. As you can see, I have quite a bit of skill. I hire many popular killers after all."

Who knew in seven years the pitcher and the catcher from the same baseball club in high school would meet again as a killer and a consultant. *Could this be coincidence, or could this be the world is smaller than it seems?*

"But more than that, Sarucchi, you're looking for a job, right? If you'd like, how about following through with some of advice. I have connections around this area, and I may be able to introduce you to some of them."

It did not matter if they were fellow classmates; he was a someone with an occupation he knew nothing about. There was no way he could believe him. However, he was intrigued at the word *connections*. 'What's important is connections.' The words of his superior rang in his mind. He felt if he let this chance go he may not find a job again, so he wavered.

He decided to talk with Nitta about his experiences up until now while he thought it over. About entering Murder Inc after graduating high school. About working as a killer. About working those seven years and quitting just the other day.

"You quit the company? Why?"

“It was hella boring.” He spits back.

Saruwatari felt like he was a boxer going up against a sandbag everyday at that company. It was not even sparring or even facing off in a match, it was just continuously hitting an unresistant black mass. That was how he felt. He was just killing the most delicate of human beings. His opponents never once were able to fight him back.

“I wanted to go up against much stronger guys. If I can, I wanna fight another killer as me.”

“I see. So you became a freelancer and tried to look for a mediator, but no one was hiring anywhere, right?”

“Damn none of them said they hire a nameless guy.” But he could not accept it. He found it wrong. It should be the same as saying professional umpires were just as excellent nameless. It should be obvious killers should not be known by name.

“Shouldn’t be nameless = excellent?”

Saruwatari had not been known by anyone or even slipped up once; he just followed through with his jobs. That was how he was nameless. *Wouldn’t it be a disqualification for an assassin’s name to be widely known when they need to be secretive?*

Nitta gave a bitter smile at Saruwatari discussing that with him.

“I think you have a principle to your sense of being a killer. That train of thought would be correct if you were employed by some organization. But not selling yourself out by giving a name as a freelancer won’t do. You won’t pass it around in this city especially. How many killers do you think there are in Fukuoka?”

“Like I know,” he cut the answer short. “I don’t know.”

“That’s right, you don’t know. Anyway there’s a lot. So much so that they say 3% of the population is made up of killers. How can you stand out among them? How can you leave an impact? That’s what is important.” Nitta spoke with a serious expression. “‘Rumors’ become ‘reputation,’ affecting your ‘renown.’ And if it becomes great enough then you become a ‘legend.’”

All the work done at a company up until this point would not help at all here. To Fukuoka even Saruwatari was a nameless newcomer. He had to toss away what he had of his career and start from zero. *How interesting. Ain't this a step up?* He felt like the boredom that coiled around him for these past few years had disappeared in an instant.

His whole body shook. *I'll definitely rise up to the top*, the edges of Saruwatari's mouth curled up into a smile.

"Say, Sarucchi." Nitta was grinning as well. "Won't you work with me?"

"Ah? With you?"

"Correct. I'll make you into the number one killer in Fukuoka as a consultant. The strongest 'killer of killers'."

He had always been a man he could not read. He was sociable, but he had no idea what he was thinking inside his head. He occasionally felt a sort of eeriness behind his smile. And that atmosphere surrounding him was still going strong even now.

His eyes shone a dangerous gleam within his glasses.

"Let's team up again. The two of us. Like in the past."

Translation Notes:

1. As of most places mentioned in this series, Canal City is a real place. [View the Canal City here](#).
2. Jon Jerde is a well-known architect, especially for designing malls. Some of his works besides Canal City Hakata include: the Mall of America, Santa Monica Place, Universal CityWalk Hollywood, Horton Plaza, Namba Parks and many buildings in Las Vegas and other cities.
3. Peter Lefcourt's *The Dreyfus Affair: A Love Story*. This is a work about homophobia in the field of baseball. I don't have access to the novel itself, so I'm not actually sure if that one line Martinez cited is indeed accurate; I just went off of the given Japanese line.

In Japanese the title of the work is actually different. It is called *ni yuukan no koi* (二遊間の恋). *Ni yuukan* is a term to refer to the area between the

short and second. In English this would be “middle-fielders.” So the title in Japanese literally means “love between middle-fielders,” or “the middle-fielders’ love,” hence Enokida’s comment upon hearing the title.

Interestingly enough Banba is the second baseman and Lin is the shortstop just like the lovers in the story. Take that however you like.

4. Battery/Batterymates – The term battery refers collectively to the pitcher and the catcher. They may also be called batterymen or batterymates of one another.
5. Hiyashi Yamakake Udon – Chilled udon noodles with raw grated Japanese mountain yam.
6. Yaki Udon – A stir fry dish consisting of thick, smooth, white udon noodles mixed with a soy based sauce, meat, and vegetables. It is similar to *yakisoba*, but with udon noodles instead of soba noodles.

Third Inning

Top of Third Inning

Club.Eve was completely different than the cheap cabaret clubs overflowing with loud music. The whole club was engulfed in a calm atmosphere. It had the remodeled interior decorating of a Ginza high class club from a drama series. The reasoning Yamato insisted to him repeatedly that ‘the guests won’t do anything inappropriate’ now made sense to him.

Why do I have to disguise myself as a hostess and infiltrate this club Kumiko’s husband goes to? Lin had pouted. He could not understand it, but now he could not even complain.

“Rinko-chan.” The owner of the club called out to him. Rinko was a hostess name Lin thought of on the spot. “Go to the ninth table right away. There’s a guest.”

“Haa.....”

When Lin gave an unenthusiastic reply, “smile, smile now,” the manager made a wide cheeky smile. “Be civil.”

Lin had already had his hair and makeup taken care of by the former beauty artist, Jiro, and he was wearing a light pink, one-shoulder dress. He was wearing a silicon padded, nude bra to deceptively appear to have a bust. The illumination in the club was dim due to the luxurious chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Like this Lin could hide the fact that he was a man.

While tripping over the hem of his dress a few times he headed to the designated seat. He was wearing higher heels than usual, so it was fairly difficult for him to walk in them. Arriving at the table Lin gave a sigh. He was unusually apprehensive.

“E-excuse me~.”

Smile, smile now. Be civil. He makes an unrefined smile while reciting that in his mind. After coming all this way he cannot despair and give up now. “Nice to meet you, I’m Rinko~.”

As the manager instructed he goes on his knees in front of the seat and bows his head while giving his greeting.

The guest was a young man in his mid twenties. He is wearing a cowboy outfit like a person out of a western film.

“You’re called Rinko-chan? How cute.”

Lin kept his smile even as his face was stiffening. “Haha, I get told that a lot.”

“I’m Riku Makishimo. Call me Ricky.”

Yamato had said Club.Eve was a club for people of the mafia and killers. Many came here as a place for entertainment and business discussions, and all the hostesses appeared to be used to these kinds of guests.

This man being Lin’s first client also called himself a killer.

“I’m rather famous in the underground, you know? Hey, have you heard of my name? ‘The two-hand gun Ricky’.”

He had never heard of him before.

“.....Hmm, I don’t know.”

Ricky’s expression clouded over at Lin’s reply. He quickly corrected himself. “A-actually I feel like I heard that name before, maybe.”

“Right?”

He immediately got back his triumphant look. *What an annoying guy.*

“I’m a wandering gunman. I’ve been taking up jobs from all around the world, you see. From America to the Dominican Republic, Israel and even Nagoya.”

“Whaa, that’s amazing.”

“These are my pals.” Ricky took out his two revolvers and showed them off.

After that he talked passionately about his guns as Lin just made the appropriate responses. Without prolonging the time, he left with just, “I’ll ask for you next time.” *Just handling one person is so exhausting. Being a hostess is a tiresome occupation.* Lin sighed while seeing Ricky off.

Having finished one job he was heading back to the break room when,

“Ah, Rinko-chan.”

He was called out by his manager.

What the hell is it? He wanted to answer like that but refrained himself from doing so. “What is it?”

“Go help Yuri-san.”

“.....Help?”

“Yes. Table 5, okay?”

Lin headed to the fifth table as told. It was a box room for a small crowd of people behind a large pillar. There was a guest already waiting there. Lin made a civil and friendly greeting once again. “I’m Rinko~, nice to meet you~.”

He lifted up his face and looked at the guest.

“Geh.”

It was someone he knew, so he incidentally slipped up.

“Wha-” Lin’s expression froze. “Why the hell are you here -”

The guest at the fifth table was Banba.

He got seen by someone in a state he did not want to be seen in, especially by him. Immediately embarrassment washed over him, and his face turned red.

“Dontcha fret now.” Banba padded down the seat next to him. “It’s fine; come sit with me.”

Why the hell do I have to sit next to this guy and pour drinks for him? He wanted to curse and complain, but he could see the eyes of the manager from a crack in the floor, so Lin reluctantly took a seat next to him.

This sucks.

After ordering an oolong tea and giving it a taste, he glared at Banba on the side. “.....What are you doing here? Did you come here to have a laugh at me?”

“I came droppin’ by to check up on you. I was worried you got into a fight with a client, but you was really workin’ hard. How remarkable of you.”

“What do you mean by checking up on me? Idiot.” There were two empty

bottles of champagne left on the table. “You’re sure enjoying yourself.”

A bottle from this place was roughly more than a few hundred thousand yen. He must have plenty of expenses to spend for this.

“I asked for the number one girl here. She was a cutie, so I opened the wine bottles to share with her, but she went up and left to another table.”

“.....Don’t bend over backwards for her.”

For opening two champagne bottles I guess that’s this place’s number one girl. Or this man is just a simpleton.

“By the way.” Banba’s tone had turned serious. He suddenly brought up the topic of their work. “How about the husband?”

Kumiko’s husband, Tadafumi Izuku, had still not shown up in this club as of yet. “Doesn’t seem he has come yet.”

“I bet so.”

He said it in a manner as though he was expecting him not to come.

“.....Then I guess I better get up and goin’.” Banba stands up from the chair. “Well, keep up the good work.”

“Shut up. Just go already.”

“See you later, Rinko-chan. I’ll come by again.”

“I’ll kill you.”

After teasing him, Banba made his leave. Then another man came in, replacing him. He was a stern looking man wearing a white shirt.

Lin was taken aback upon seeing his face. He remembered that face. It was Long Fang Wang – the top of the Kakyuu Group.

He knew the slim man wearing a gray suit following in behind him too. He was the president’s assistant, Li. When Lin was still working for the Kakyuu Group as their killer, there was one time he had brought to the main headquarters by former boss Zhang. He happened to pass them in the hallway at that time. They were faces he would have never forgotten after seeing them once. They had that sort of intimidating presence and air around them.

Even so who knew the head of the Kakyuu Group would appear here. Furthermore while he was working here upon certain circumstances. The timing was the worst.

Lin was deeply involved with the murder of the Kakyuu Group's subordinate, Zhang. If his true identity was discovered, he would certainly be killed. Imagining the worst scenario his pulse sped up. He took in measured breaths in attempt to calm himself.

Wang brought in brawny bodyguards with him.

The manager bowed his head. "Wang-sama, welcome."

"And Yuri is?" Wang inquired. It was with a low-pitched, growling voice.

"Right now she is with another client, but I can call her over right away."

"No, it's fine." After stopping them Wang moved his gaze in his direction. Their eyes met. His heart thudded hard in his chest.

Wang pointed to Lin with his chin. "She's an unfamiliar face. Is she new?"

"Y-yes. Her name is Rinko, and she just started today....."

"I'll have her until Yuri arrives."

Eh? Lin voiced. *Hey, you're kidding right? Me?* He feels cold sweat on his back.

This just got turned into something worse. The manager was also turning pale. He was being assaulted by pressure. *Don't do anything rude. Don't make him mad.* From the looks of it, he understood full well that Wang was a fairly big customer for them. Naturally the manager felt uneasy if the brand new employee made a mistake with the important client. But Lin did not feel that way. He was only concerned with his true identity being discovered.

Lin lead Wang, Li, and their bodyguards to the VIP room. The guards were stationed outside of the room, and Wang took a seat on the sofa. Lin sat next to him, and with shaking hands he made a cup of whiskey and water. Wang's fat arm wrapped around Lin's waist.

".....By the way, it seems you've been struggling quite a bit. Just for one small killer." Not paying mind of Lin being present Wang began to converse with the other. His low graveling voice boomed within the room.

“My apologies.” Li bowed his head.

“Even though our subordinates were killed, do you just plan to leave him be?”

“We plan in gathering more killers right away.”

“Hm.” Wang smiled. However, the tone in his voice was harsh. “The Niwaka Samurai is the most skilled killer in the city of Hakata, right?”

– The Niwaka Samurai?

His heart jumped in his chest. He dropped the ice he was holding with the tongs onto the table carelessly. There was a small noise, and their conversation came to a stop. Lin apologized with a hoarse voice, feeling the gazes of multiple people on him. “I-I am sorry.....”

Wang had smiled.

“Are you nervous?” He whispered into his ear, and for various reasons he felt a chill go up his spine. The large, thick palms of Wang’s hands sneaked up under a slip in his dress and crawled along the back of his thighs. He desperately hoped those hands did not move up to his nether regions or his chest.

He swallowed the saliva quietly down his throat. While pouring a glass of whiskey Lin continued listening in on the conversation.

“Even as you’re hiring other killers, aren’t they inferior to him in the end?”

“Yes, and so.” Li answered in a composed voice. Only this man seemed capable of being fearless in front of the head of the Kakyuu Group. “We’re hiring a killer from another city.”

“Another place?”

“There are plenty of good killers outside of Hakata as well.Furthermore, it seems that man has returned.”

“That man?”

“It is the *kona-otoshi* level one; the legendary killer.”

He had heard about this before. In the past there apparently was a custom of giving ranks to a killer’s strength based off of the terms for the thickness of ramen. In order from the top it is *kona-otoshi*, *barigane*, *barikata*, *kata*, *yawa*,

bariyawa. Konaotoshi was the highest.

“ – G.G, huh.” His eyes widened, and he grinned. “Even the Niwaka Samurai has no chance against him.”

Gee gee? What abbreviation is that? Just who is that? The Niwaka Samurai has no chance against him? As if there is someone stronger than him. An even stronger killer than him; I can't believe that.

It was when he was trying to fill Wang's empty glass with alcohol and ice. Another woman appeared in the VIP room. She was a hostess with black hair, and she was wearing a white mermaid dress. Wang called her Yuri. Apparently the designated hostess had come. Now Lin could be dismissed from here. He was relieved. He stood up from his seat, bowed and took his leave.

He scurried to the breaking room with a slightly quick pace to get out of there. Once he sat on the sofa and exhaled a deep breath,

“How was it? Are you used to the work?”

A friendly hostess named Kaori, now with her makeup off, addressed him.

“Not at all.” After he answered with that he asked her. “Say, does that guest Wang often come here?”

“Wang-san? He's been coming since the place opened; he's an old, regular customer.” After she said that, Kaori lowered her voice. “They say he's an absolute pervy old man and has had multiple lovers. Seems he also has been pigging it out with some our girls here too.”

“.....You serious?”

“Right now his favorite seems to be Yuri-san.”

So it seems, he nodded in agreement.

“Yuri-san has only been here for three months. She has been able to become number one here in just three months mainly because Wang took a liking to her. He spends more money on her.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You should be careful too, Rinko-chan. Wang-san loves girls with long hair.”

The short-bobbed Kaori laughed as though to herself. Lin shook his head, recalling the sensation of Wang's crawling hands.

Bottom of Third Inning

With the wound on his right hand healed, he was ready to return to work. Abe headed over with Yamamoto to see their mediator to undertake a new job. As they were walking down the street lined up with food stands along the Nakasu riverside the red 'ramen' sign curtain could be seen. The head of this food stall called Genchan was their mediator for assassination work.

When they came up to the front of the shop, they heard the faint voice of the owner.

"Sorry but that ain't gonna do." He did not appear to be talking to himself. He was talking with someone else. "The Niwaka Samurai is busy hustlin' another job."

Abe's hand stopped before he reached for the curtain hearing those words.

– The Niwaka Samurai? It can't be, the killer of killers?

While hesitant Abe pulled back the curtain and took a seat without a word. Yamamoto followed him in the same way.

The boss, Genzo, was in the middle of a phone call. He had an old style flip phone pressed to his right ear. The person on the other line appeared to be in a foul mood as he could hear him yelling from where they are sitting. Genzo distances the receiver away from his ear and grimaces.

"That can't be helped now," he presses on with a quiet voice. "I'll send ya another man in his place. It's alright; he'll be a skilled one."

After he told them that he dropped the call. He turned around to face them and smiled, "Sorry for making ya wait."

"Give us work." Abe stated as always.

"Your injury is fine now?"

"Yeah." Recalling Yamamoto's blunder the other day, he began to feel a little annoyance rose up.

“I just got a job for ya in perfect timin’. It was a request from me.” Genzo began discussing the job right away. “I want you to kill the man coming here.”

It was rare to receive a request from their mediator.

“Is he a killer?”

Since Genzo had nodded Abe had braced himself for the worst. When he asked if he was strong, Genzo burst out a laugh.

“You don’t need to fret now. He’s called a killer, but he’s just some amateur.”

According to Genzo their target was immersed in gambling and knees deep in debt. And to pay off that debt he got the idea to become a killer. He was introduced to Genzo by an acquaintance in the underground business and he had given him easy jobs, but the situation had taken a poor turn.

“He went up and killed the wrong guy.”

“.....The wrong one?”

“I told him to kill Ichiro Matsuei and he gone and killed a man named Ichiro Matsunaga.”

“Haha.” Yamamoto laughed. “What an idiot that guy is.”

Like you’re one to talk, he wants to say back.

“So I told him I ain’t givin’ him no jobs no more.”

Mistaking a target was completely prohibited in this business industry. Especially for someone old-fashioned like Genzo. It was a bothersome rule. “I assume so.”

“And that fella sure snapped back I tell ya. He went and threatened me. That he’ll sell me out to the police if I don’t pay up.”

“So it’s better to kill him.”

“Right?” Genzo nodded. “That man is coming here now to negotiate consolation money. Go and finish him off quickly after.”

After a few minutes the target came by. He was wearing a blue T-shirt with English characters on it and jeans. He was still a young man. Abe burned the image of the man’s face and outfit into his mind.

After the man disputed with Genzo harshly he got up from his seat and started walking along the riverside. They get up as well and begin tailing him. They follow him from behind while leaving a distance between themselves and the target.

The target headed towards Haruyoshi Bridge. He crossed the pedestrian walkway without going over the bridge. The light just changed to red, hindering their path. On the other side of the streets with several cars passing by the back of their target grew smaller.

The man disappeared from sight by the time the light changed to green.

“This sucks. We lost him.”

This is a problem. The path split ahead of the pedestrian walkway.

“It can’t be helped. Let’s split up. Let me know right away when you find him.”

“Got it.”

Abe takes a right towards Nakasu 2 Choume, and Yamamoto heads straight towards 4 Choume in search for him.

He looked around the area while brushing off barkers from cabaret clubs. Their target was nowhere to be found. *Did he go into one of the stores? I don’t think a man without money like him would mess around in a facility with women there.* As he was wandering around pondering to himself he received a call from Yamamoto.

[I found him. That guy.]

“Really?”

[He just came out of the convenience store.]

“Alright, keep following him. Don’t lose sight of him whatever you do. Where are you right now?”

[I see a hotel.]

He opened a map in his mind. *Around there*, he pinpointed it mentally. Returning back to the previous street he searched for Yamamoto.

[Abe-senpai.] Yamamoto suddenly changed the subject. [It’s about that

Niwaka Samurai guy.]

“What about it?”

[Well, didn't the boss say it earlier on the phone? Something about a Niwaka Samurai.]

“Do you,” his eyes widened. “Do you not know of the Niwaka Samurai? He's a famous killer. He's the killer of killers.”

He did not know that the Niwaka Samurai truly existed let alone he went to the same mediator as them though.

[M-hm.] Yamamoto whispered to himself and laughed. [Now that you mention it, we're also killing a killer now, aren't we?]

“How about you stop chattering on meaninglessly and focus on tailing the guy. He hasn't noticed you right?”

[Senpai, you sure are a worrier.] He heard Yamamoto laugh. *And whose fault do you think that is?* He grinds his teeth.

[– Ah.] Yamamoto raised his voice. [He entered a parking garage.]

“Where is the parking garage?”

[It's a coin-operated parking space next to the hotel. Seems like he's going to get in the car. If I don't hurry he'll head off somewhere. I'm going to go kill him now.] Yamamoto said impatiently.

Abe quickened his pace. Once he passed through a narrow street and turned a corner the hotel came into view. “I'll be there shortly. So just wait.”

There was no response.

“Yamamoto?” He raised his voice once more. “Yamamoto. What's going on?”

Yamamoto gave no answer.

Ahead of him he saw the yellow P sign for parking. It was a hundred yen for half an hour. Yamamoto stood still in the small space where only five vehicles could park.

“Ah, senpai.” He turned to face him and proudly stated. “I put a stop to him.”

A man wearing a blue T-shirt was fallen at Yamamoto's feet. There was a knife pierced into the vicinity of the man's heart. He appeared to already be dead.

On the right side of his T-shirt that had turned nearly black from the blood there was an embroidery mark. It was probably the mark of a brand somewhere. *Huh*, he realized. No matter how he looked at it, something was off. When Abe saw him earlier he did not have this brand mark. He should be wearing a T-shirt with English characters on it. *It can't be, did he change in lieu? That can't be it.* Having a bad feeling about this he went to confirm the corpse's face.

The color drained from his face.

" – Who the hell is this?"

The face was different from the man who stopped by at Genzo's place. Abe hastily fished through the man's belongings. There was a wallet in his jean's pocket. The name on his license was Tadafumi Izuku. It did not appear to be fake. It was a different person after all.

"Isn't this the wrong guy?!" He yelled.

"B-but." Yamamoto replied back hesitantly. "He was wearing a blue T-shirt."

"But the design of the T-shirt is different!"

This was the worst. He braced his head in his hands.

Yamamoto only focused on the 'blue T-shirt' and had followed a guy like that all the way here. Without considering how many men wear blue T-shirts in Nakasu and without confirming who it was, he ended up killing a completely different man.

".....You are truly a hopeless idiot."

He felt killing intent well up inside him. He wanted to bash his brainless partner's head in.

Translation Notes:

1. Ginza – A shopping district in Tokyo
2. Long Fang Wang – Wang is a pretty common last name, and as a

character it means 'king.' According to [kinomiya-kazane](#) on Tumblr told me it felt like an old, traditional name and that it felt like the name was straight out of an old Chinese mafia movie.

3. Ichiro Matsuei and Ichiro Matsunaga both have the exact same kanji for their names – 松永一郎. So the person just read the name wrong and found the wrong guy.

Fourth Inning

Top of Fourth Inning

After escaping from the Kakyuu members, Lin was unsure what to do with his spare time without having to interact with clients in particular. He reclined back onto the sofa in the waiting room and yawned. As the new hostess Rinko he did not have any designated clients to work for, and it was not like they were so short on staff that anyone needed help. He figured he should do some progress in investigating and to kill some time, so he wondered if he should ask the employees nearby, “do you know of a guest named Tadafumi Izuku?” But troublesome enough their client Kumiko did not want her husband to find out she hired a detective into the issue, so he could not do that. The most Lin could do right now was occasionally pretend to head to the restrooms and see if Kumiko’s husband had arrived or not.

Since he was bored, he was just about to read someone’s fashion magazine when the manager arrived and called out to Lin. “Rinko-chan. You can go now.”

I can go? So I get to go home? Lin felt let-down. He looked at the clock on the wall. It was still not even twelve o’clock.

“Is that alright?”

“It is a weekday, so there are not many guests.”

According to the hostess Kaori earlier, the night club often got up and going early. So they did not have to pay hourly wages meaninglessly, they sent employees without any work home early. Lin and two other women that seemed to have time off were told to clock out.

“Also,” the manager said apologetically. “I’m sorry, but can everyone take a taxi home today?”

“Ehh.” The hostesses raised their voice in alarm. “Why?”

“I can’t get a hold of Tadafumi-san.”

Tadafumi – he startled at the name.

Lin immediately approached the manager and asked him. “And Tadafumi-san is?”

“He’s our driver.”

“Tadafumi Izuku-san is?”

“That’s him but,” the manager was a bit surprised. “Why do you know him?”

“When you say driver do you mean he’s an employee of this facility?”

“Well he is more like a part-time worker dropping off the girls back to their home.....”

What, so he was just their driver.

Now he could connect the dots. Kumiko’s husband did not go to the club for leisure he worked there. That was why he had so many of the hostesses contact information. It was vexing, but Banba’s train of thought was right.

Discovering her husband’s innocence that was one case closed. He had no more business at this club. He probably did not need to come back again. Lin began to make arrangements to go home. So no one saw him he stealthily change clothes in a room. He changed into a T-shirt and shorts and stated his thanks before leaving.

Shortly after he received his pay for the day and left the club he checked his cell phone. He had one missed call. It was from Genzo.

“Welcome.”

When he lifted up the curtain to the food stall Genchan, he was greeted pleasantly by the owner who had a mix of white hair.

“.....’Sup.”

“Oh? What it’s just you, Lin? I thought you was a nice looker from somewhere.” His makeup and hair style were different than normal, so even though they were acquaintances naturally he would not have recognized him right away. “What’s up with that getup?”

“It’s for an investigation into an affair.So then, did you want something from me?”

“I got an urgent job that needs to be taken care of right away, but can you take it?”

He did not have any particular reason to turn it down. “.....Well, I’m off anyway. I don’t really mind.”

“I need you to go here right away.”

On the paper he handed him was the scribbled name of a hotel nearby. Lin immediately took notice of what was written below: ‘Room 501, Yasukuni Shindou.’

“So I just have to kill this Shindou guy right?”

“Hold up a sec!” Genzo’s expression turned fierce. He quickly grabbed Lin’s arm and turned him around. “You must not kill him!”

Enokida left the internet cafe he was staying at and headed to the designated rendezvous point. It was at a *shio ramen* shop in a narrow, dirty alleyway next to the Gates Building. When Enokida arrived to the shop, the man was already eating ramen. He was sitting at the center counter. After Enokida purchased a meal ticket and only ordering ramen he went up to the man’s side.

The man was an Asian named Nguyen he came to know when he first met the client. He was probably Vietnamese, though he spoke fluent Japanese and had no accent. Nguyen seemed to be a scout for some organization and was going around the whole country. Scouts pounced on the killers who exchange business with mediators in the area and called out to them. They inquire as to if they were unsatisfied with their current circumstances and pressed them if they want to earn more wages. And they pulled in the killers who had an interest in their conversation into their organization. That was how those scouts work.

“I want to know the whereabouts of this person.”

Nguyen said. He placed a photograph in front of Enokida.

“Ah,” he accidentally raised his voice upon seeing it.

The one in the photo was the face of someone he knew – it was Saitou. It seemed this was taken secretly.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, nothing much.” Enokida avoided the topic with a composed expression.
“And who is this man?”

“His name is Saitou. He ran away from our company. And I have to put an end to his life.”

Then does that mean this person Nguyen is an employee of Murder Inc. as well?

“I want you to find him. Can you do it?”

“Who do you think I am? That’s easy work.” He already knew his phone number and his e-mail address, and they met each other every week for baseball practice. “Is there a time limit?”

“Not particularly. I’m not in a rush, so take your time. I have to go back to Tokyo when this is finished. So I want to fully enjoy nights in Nakasu.”

The food in this city is so good, Nguyen said as he was slurping his ramen.

– Now then, what should I do?

Enokida shrugged his shoulders in exasperation while looking at the photo of Saitou.

“I don’t recall calling for a prostitute.”

Yasukuni Shindou said in a displeased voice after looking at Lin from top to bottom. He was a member of the third division of a lower rank gang organization that was even well known in even Fukuoka, but he was hardly dignified with that emaciated expression.

“I said I’m a killer sent by Genzo. Don’t make me say it repeatedly.”

“Really? Are you really a killer?”

The room Shindou was staying at was a little more stylish than the modesty of a business hotel. There was a large bed and a comfortable sofa. The toilet and the bathroom had glass doors, and if the curtains were not shut there was a complete view to outside. There was even a terrace which allows someone to have a full view of the night scenery of Canal City and Nakasu. It was a fairly high class room. The interior decorations had a black and white chic design. The illumination was all indirect lighting, embellishing the room in a orange glow

and bringing with it a calm atmosphere.

In the midst of it Shindou was the farthest from calm. He was pacing back and forth before sitting down on the bed and slumping forward with an exhale. He then grasped his head with both hands.

“.....I told Genzo to give me the Niwaka Samurai. I said I didn’t care how much it’d be.”

“Though you said that it doesn’t matter. Seems the Niwaka Samurai can’t let go of the other job.”

“This is the worst.” Shindou collapsed in discouragement. “Genzo said he’d send a skilled killer in his place. And how dare he send some meager looking killer I can’t even tell if they are a guy or a girl.”

That was inexcusable. Lin turned sullen. *What a rude guy.* Even though I came all this way for him. It pissed me off. “It’s not like you can see how a killer fights based on how they look.”

“That’s, true.....” Shindou muttered. He stares at Lin closely as if to estimate his worth and asks. “Are you strong?”

“I’m decent.” He answered bluntly, and after he took a seat and crossed his legs onto the table Lin moved onto the main topic at hand. “Listen, hurry up and explain already. The details of your request.”

He was told by Genzo to hear the details from the person himself. Shindou began with a dark expression and tight voice.

“.....A killer is coming. To kill me.”

“What kind of killer?” *Is it a man or a woman? Is their weapon of choice a gun or a blade?* When he asked these questions in rapid succession Shindou shook his head from left to right.

“I don’t know. But I know the one who requested it. It’s Kitaguchi.”

“Kitaguchi?”

“Takashi Kitaguchi. He’s a subordinate from the same organization as me. We’ve been in the middle of a dispute for the head of the family since pops died.”

“So it’s a plot to eliminate his rival by hiring a killer to try and stand at the top.....He sure seems petty.”

“About that.” Shindou’s face was twisted in vexation. “For some reason or another the petty one is me.”

“.....What do you mean?”

“Our group decided as long as there is no legitimate reason that we must not resolve matters armed forces. It’d be a problem if the internal dispute continued and the group was annihilated. So I kept trying to talk it over with Kitaguchi numerous times to find a peaceful solution.”

“Then why is Kitaguchi trying to have you killed?”

“Not too long ago Kitaguchi’s office was attacked. The culprits were two men. Kitaguchi wasn’t there so he was fine, but several of his men were killed. Seems the guys who made the assault asked, ‘where is Kitaguchi?’”

“Whose work was that?”

“I don’t know.....But Kitaguchi is suspecting it was me. I got a call immediately after the incident from him. ‘You finally did it huh.’ ‘I hired a killer. Prepare yourself.’ He said. But it wasn’t me. I don’t know anything about it.”

So since then Shindou had been jumping from hotel to hotel, continuously living his life on the run. Aware of the notice for his murder, there was no way he could remain calm. He finally understood why he was so overly cautious and restless.

“Was it your underlings that are devoted to you then?”

“I don’t imagine so. They should know if they lay a hand on Kitaguchi that it would put me in a bad spot.”

“Then maybe that Kitaguchi had his own office attacked. To have an excuse to kill you.”

Shindou’s expression wavered. “No way.What does he think of his own men’s lives then?”

This guy had a good heart. He thought to himself. And that was why he was set up. It was difficult for good guys to live in this industry. There were

exceptions though.

Shindou braced his head. "Why did it turn out like this....."

He reaffirmed the details of the request. "At any rate, I just have to beat the killer who comes to kill you at their own game right?"

"That's right." Shindou nodded. "I will run away overseas in the morning by plane. So I just have to be protected until then."

"When is the time of the flight?"

"Eight."

Right now it was just about one am. "It's going to be a long fight."

Lin looked at Shindou with a side glance. The yakuza man over fifty was making a pitiful expression like a discarded dog. Perhaps due to the stress but his complexion was poor, and he had dark shadows under his eyes. He considered him with pity. "Anyway rest for a bit. You haven't slept right? If you don't build up strength you won't be able to get away."

".....I can't."

Well, I guess you couldn't sleep without a care in this sort of situation, he smiles bitterly.

"Then eat something." Actually now mentioning it, he remembered he did not eat anything since noon. He opened the provided refrigerator in the room. There were only canned beer, green tea and mineral water PET bottles inside with nothing that could satisfy his appetite.

".....Hey." Shindou suddenly raised his head. He moved his gaze over to the direction of the terrace on the other side of the curtain. "Was there a sound outside just now?"

Lin tilted his head in confusion. "Not really."

"The window shook."

"Isn't that just the wind?"

"Please take a look." Shindou said in a tearful voice.

He was too nervous. Lin was also unsurprisingly irritated for each time a

strong breeze hit against the window even if his life was being hunted down. “You’re such a worrier.” As he stated that in exasperation he pulled back the curtain.

As he slide open the curtains the exterior scenery became unconcealed. And the glass in front of him shattered at the same time.

“Wha -”

Lin instantly jumped back and away from the window.

A silhouette leaped into Lin’s field of vision. *It can’t be*, his eyes widened.

– Someone is here.

A man was there standing on the terrace. He was holding a metal bat in his right hand. He brushed off the remaining glass on the edges of the window with his bat violently. The man entered the room as he stepped on the scattered fragments.

“Hee.” Shindou cried from behind him. He lost his footing and fell to the floor.

“Move.” The man said and hurled himself at Lin.

His body dropped and Lin landed on the bed. *I got had*, he thought. He was taken by surprise and his thoughts were suspended. Thanks to that lapse of time he was slow to react. His mind finally caught up to the situation. The killer Kitaguchi hired had finally arrived. He must have dropped down from a room next to or right above this one and broke the window with the bat.

“Even though your life is being targeted you bring a woman to a hotel?” The killer slowly approaches Shindou. “You’re sure are naive.”

Save me, Shindou cried out in plea. He backed away with his rear stuck to the floor. However, his back quickly ran into the wall. With no place to run to his body minutely shook in fear.

It’s your fault. Lin resented Shindou in his mind. *Since you are staying in a nice room with a terrace you made it easy for him to get in*. He wanted to give one insult to him, but his priority right now was to kill the assassin in front of him. Although his method of going about it was different this time. Now he had to take a person’s life while protecting another person’s life.

What should I do? Lin thought over to himself. Fighting with a burden put him at a disadvantage. So that left one way. Lin slammed into the man's side as he raised the bat.

Unable to hold against the sudden force at his side the man lost his balance and collapsed.

He ordered Shindou in that moment.

"I'll buy time. Use it and run." Lin grabbed Shindou's arm. He roughly pulled him up and made him stand. "Do you have a car?"

Shindou answered, chattering. "I-in th-the garage under -"

"Hurry up and go then!"

Shindou rushed off after Lin's yell. He bursted his way out of the room in haste.

"What is this now?" The killer stood back up and fixed his grip on the bat. "You are his bodyguard?"

Lin took a moment to analyze his opponent. He had one metallic bat for a weapon. *That's unique*, he marveled to himself. Blunt weapons were unpopular in this industry. Killers usually preferred lethal weapons or high mass killing weapons to kill someone in one blow with absolute certainty. Rather than a strong, buff man with a build like a bodybuilder the man in front of him was a young man with a medium build. *By chance what is the reason to use a blunt weapon? Does he enjoy beating someone's head or face until he can see bone? Is this person really a killer?* He could not sell him short, but he appeared so amateurish. He could only think of him as a hoodlum walking around and showing off his brutality.

Lin stealthily took out his weapon of choice. It was his preferred Chinese knife-pistol. As the name suggested at a glance it looked like a normal knife, but there were bullets inside the small handle with a trigger on its guard to fire off the rounds. The number of charges was three shots. It was to be used for a crucial moment when in trouble.

The killer swung down the bat towards Lin. He rolled to and avoided the attack. The bat hit and broke the wooden table in two in Lin's place. The bat

then swung to the side. It was easy to dodge it. It was not that impressive of a swing. It was slow and unrefined.

“I know someone who swings far faster than you.” Lin grinned at him. “Like our fourth batter.”

Anticipating the enemy’s attack he approached the bed while continuously dodging. He grabbed the edges of the sheets and dragged them overhead. The white sheet fell through the air and dropped on top of the killer.

“You know, a bat -” Once he blocked his movements with the sheets, Lin pierced the tip of the knife into the struggling man’s neck. “ – It isn’t something to hit people with!”

Blood spurted out. The pure white sheets immediately were dyed red. After a few moments the killer’s movements stopped all together. He then dropped to the floor unceremoniously.

While kicking the tip of his mule shoes into the dead body of the killer he thought to himself. *Wasn’t he too simple minded? He was weak. He was only at the level of a delinquent kid with a bat.* He feels embarrassment that a guy like this would call himself a killer just like him. If Shindou, who was crazed with his life in danger, could prepare to hire protection, then the other should have prepared a more proper killer. *I guess that Kitaguchi guy wasn’t that bright,* he considers.

Disposing of the killer’s body, Lin left the room and went after Shindou. He called him as he got onto the elevator. He received his number from Genzo earlier.

The call immediately connected. “Where are you right now?”

[.....On the emergency staircase. I’m heading to the parking garage.] Shindou’s breath comes in short gasps; he appears to have been running this whole time.

“I’m heading over there now too.”

Lin pressed the button for first floor. The elevator began to descend.

“Once you get there get in the car. Keep your head low and hide.” After he

gave him those orders he felt an unsettling premonition.

The previous killer knew where Shindou's room was. Then perhaps he also knew about Shindou's car. There could be a possibility of a second plan in effect if the first should fail. He did not seem to be that smart, but it was a thought to consider. Lin corrected himself. " – Wait, don't get in the car. It could be a trick."

There could be an explosion the moment the car door was opened. And Shindou's flesh would be turned into smithereens. He could imagine such a scenario.

[Y-yeah. I got it.]

"Once you get there just wait patiently."

The elevator was passing by the third floor.

[.....Even so why was my whereabouts discovered?]

"Was there anyone else who knew you were staying at this hotel?"

[Only a few of my subordinates. I only told guys I have known for a long time and can trust.]

"One of those guys you could trust must have talked. You weren't betrayed, were you?"

[I can't think of that.] Shindou asserted to him. He certainly did seem to care for his beloved subordinates.

"Then they were forced to. It can't be put against them if they were tortured for it."

[That can't be -]

Shindou's words cut off.

It was immediately after that.

[Hee]

He heard his yelp.

"What's wrong?" He had a bad feeling about this.

[S-stop, please, gya-agh -]

“Hey, Shindou! What the hell is going on!”

The elevator made it to the first floor and the doors slide open. Lin pressed through the gap between the doors and rushed over to the parking garage from the side entrance.

There were several cars parked at the outdoor parking space the hotel established. Against one of the black, high class cars among them was Shindou, stood upright.

But something was off.

“.....Shindou?”

He called his name, but there was no response. Shindou’s eyes were wide open and his limbs were shaking. A silver gleam of something long was jutting out of his stomach.

“Ah, gha”

Shindou gasped. His cell phone slipped from his right hand. A puddle was forming at his feet. It was a dark colored liquid – blood. A blade was thrust through his heart from behind. More blood trickled down.

There was a person’s presence behind Shindou.

The blade supporting his body was pulled out, and Shindou fell to the ground unceremoniously. He remained unmoving.

The form of the man hiding behind Shindou was exposed under the fluorescent lighting, leaving him out in the open to see.

He was a tall man in a pure black suit.

The man slowly turned towards him. The man’s face was half covered by a mask. It had its eyes and eyebrows slanted – the foolish expression of the Hakata Niwaka mask.

Out of everything, who knew this man would appear.

“.....It’s you? (the Niwaka Samurai)”

I got tricked. So that small fry with the metal bat was a trap? So I was the one

who made time for him. Lin's molars grind against each other, and he takes his stance.

The Niwaka Samurai moved his wrist and swung the katana. After wiping away Shindou's blood stuck to the blade he then placed the sword back into its scabbard. Although he is aware of Lin's presence he does not show any intention to fight him. Lin did not like his attitude.

"I'll kill you." He closed the distance and brandished the knife over his head.

The Niwaka Samurai leaned to the side and dodged the attack. He made some distance between them. He was chagrined by that as well. "You bastard!"

He vigorously took a step forward when it happened.

"Oh, wah."

Feeling the sensation of something suddenly pulling at his leg, Lin gave a small yelp.

He looked down at his feet. The heel of his right shoe was caught in the grid patterned trench grating. He had unknowingly stepped in the grating at some point.

He lurched forward. Lin attempted to regain his balance, but he could not stop the momentum and fell. His face collided with the ground, and he made a pitiful cry as he did so. "Bu-heh."

"Ow....." His left hand brushed over his face as he groaned.

"You alright there?"

The Niwaka Samurai, Zenji Banba, finally spoke, his gentle Hakata dialect flowed out from above him. He reached out his right hand towards Lin. "That's why I always tell you, right? You gotta have a grasp on your surroundings."

Look what's around you more. Widen your field of vision. You must not get completely absorbed in just your opponent. Just like your error during defense that game. Banba continues on with his lecture.

Completely losing the will to fight, Lin whispered quietly. ".....Shut up."

He batted away Banba's outstretched hand and stood up with his own

strength. Once he spotted Shindou's corpse fallen on the ground he was assaulted by a disconsolate feeling. *I shouldn't have let him go alone*, he regretted a little bit. He apologized to him in his heart. *Sorry. I couldn't protect you.*

"Now then." Banba suggested in a carefree tone. "How 'bout we get some ramen and head on home?"

Bottom of Fourth Inning

Saruwatari when he was employed at Murder Inc. did not have a specialized weapon of choice in particular.

He did lean more towards fighting in close combat, but if he only specialized in that he would have had to approach the issue concerning his personality even more. To avoid that he chose to change weapons everyday; something suitable for the job at hand each time. There were times he used blades and times he used guns. Rifles, throwing knives, and even ice picks. He preferred using a weapon anyone could obtain easily. For places he could not bring in lethal weapons like that he used poisons and even fought bare handed before. Fundamentally he regarded his client's idea over his own preference.

He felt there was more of an advantage to use the weapons he was used to, but there was also the disadvantage of discovering who committed the crime if he killed the target in the same method each time. Furthermore, he was taught at the company's training program that being able to use any weapon was part of a killer's status. Saruwatari surprisingly agreed with this perspective as well.

He talked about that the same day he met Nitta. But Nitta shook his head in disagreement.

"No, no. You have to use the same weapon. Every time."

Nitta's train of thought was the complete opposite of Saruwatari's. There were numerous times they did not see eye to eye, but this time Saruwatari was surprised.

"That also leaves a strong impact. It lets anyone know your methods."

This was the second time he met up with Nitta since signing the consultant contract. He was told the rendezvous point and was brought to the darts bar

Lady Madonna in Konya City.

When he entered the bar there was the female owner from last time. She turned her gaze towards Saruwatari and gestured for him to head to the center of the shop with the point of her thumb. Ahead of him was a sturdy, metal door. There was an 'authorized personnel only' poster on the door, but Saruwatari opened it regardless. He proceeded down the staircase heading to the basement.

The basement floor had the same layout as the first floor. There were several stools at the counter and booths. The big difference was the three human dummies in place of the darts machines. There were a few men throwing knives at the models or shooting them with suppressor guns. This appeared to be the floor for killers to use.

"Sarucchi! Over here, over here!" Nitta was waving at him from one of the center booths.

He sat down on the other side of him and ordered his drink. He had a lower alcohol tolerance, so he ordered a cola instead. Nitta was drinking a watered down cocktail with a cherry mixed in. In the booth next to them there were men in the middle of exchanging guns.

After Saruwatari's cola was brought to the table he went straight to the topic at hand.

"I prepared the perfect weapon for you to use today." Nitta told him as he took out a long item from inside his black luggage bag and put it on the table.

Saruwatari had grown used to every possible weapon since long ago. No matter what weapon Nitta had prepared for him he had the confidence he already mastered it. So he thought.

But his confidence wavered slightly. The weapon was beyond his expectations.

"Ah?"

He stared at the long weapon set on the table dumbfounded. It looked like a Japanese sword. But for a Japanese blade the length was a little short, and it was rectilinear. Yet the blade was long for a short sword.

“.....What is this?”

“Can’t you tell by looking at it?” Nitta answered him. “It’s a ninja sword.”

“Haa?”

What did he say just now? A ninja sword? He examined Nitta’s expression, doubting his ears. Ignoring Saruwatari’s bewilderment, Nitta said excitedly, “isn’t it cool?”

Is this a pistol disguised as a ninja sword or something? He considered and pulled out the blade. Just by seeing the glinting silver steel of the blade he could confirm it was indeed a ninja sword.

“I have some other weapons too.” Saruwatari was further taken aback upon seeing the objects Nitta took out of his bag and laid out onto the table.

“I got a lot of ninja-like weapons for you. I had them specially made. I got shuriken, kunai -”

“Are you fucking with me right now?” *Is he seriously telling him to change occupations from a killer to a ninja?*

“Well there’s a killer in Fukuoka under the name of a samurai, so a ninja killer is possible as well, right? It’d leave an impact and you’d be remembered by people. And besides, isn’t a ninja’s weapons suitable for assassination in the first place? So isn’t this killing two birds with one stone?”

What the hell is this man thinking? He could not tell if he was joking or being serious. As he was trying to wrap his head around this with great confusion, “Ah, that’s right,” Nitta had said before taking out a black cloth and handing it over to him. “Wrap this around your head.”

“What is this?”

“It’s a kerchief. These are worn often by ninjas right? Like this you can hide your face and show off that ninja-likeness. And how about, ‘I’ll be taking your life!’ as your signature phrase? Wouldn’t that be cool?”

And what historical play is that from? “.....You’re totally fucking with me, aintcha?”

He suddenly felt both irritated and absurd.

“Dontcha have none other modern stuff?”

“I prepared some transmitters and listening devices that could help you out on the job, but for weapons I just have these.”

He definitely appeared to be fixated on ninjas.

“We can have you practice throwing the shurikens. It wouldn’t look cool if you missed with them. Try throwing them over there as a trail run.” Nitta said and pointed to the human dummies. “Choose whichever you like. I got three sided shuriken, four sided shuriken.....six sided, eight sided, and even cross shuriken.”

“Absolutely not.” *Why do I have to use something so stupid?* He rebuttals, but Nitta’s insistence was strong.

“It’s fine, go ahead. Come on now, quickly.”

Pressured, Saruwatari grudgingly stood up. He positioned himself twenty meters away from the dummies with four sided shurikens in hand.

He had been a killer for a long time at this point, but he had never thrown a shuriken before. This was his first time even touching one. *How should I throw it?* He considered as he focused on his target. For the meantime, he decided to throw them with the snap of his wrist like with darts. There was a thunk noise; the shuriken struck into the wall of the bar.

“Your control with your first pitch is as bad as always.”

Being teased by his right-hand man in the past, Saruwatari clicked his tongue in annoyance. “.....Shut the hell up.”

“How about you try and throw it from below?” Nitta suggested. “I mean you were always an underhanded pitcher.”

It was true. Saruwatari was an underthrow player in high school. The batters were always at the mercy of his pitches thrown five centimeters above the ground. Even so what he was holding right now was not a hard ball but a shuriken.

He held up the four sided shuriken again. Saruwatari set himself in motion to throw it, recalling the sensation of his pitches from those times. He kicked up his left leg, then dropped straight down and took one step forward. At the same

time his body bent over and he lowered his posture. He swung his right hand marginally close to the ground. His whole arm snapped like a whip and threw the shuriken.

Saruwatari's pitch plunged straight into his target. This time it hit the dummy and not the wall. But the shuriken hit the right thigh of it instead.

"Ohh, that's good." Nitta clapped. "That's a nice course to the outside corner."

"What nice course? I missed his vital spots."

This is ridiculous. Saruwatari shrugged his shoulders. *I shouldn't have signed a contract with him,* he regretted. *Can I really be messing around doing stuff like this?* When he expressed his concerns and doubts honestly, Nitta boasted. "It's alright. As long as you do exactly as I say, you'll definitely become famous."

Saruwatari grimaced, imagining himself wearing a kerchief and fighting as a killer while throwing shuriken. No matter what he picture came to mind he only thought he would be a laughing stock. *I'll be famous as the idiotic killer.* He was completely unsatisfied.

Abe was at a complete loss as to what he should do while they stuff the body into the backseat of their van. He supposed they could dispose of the body by sinking it into Hakata bay. If the body was not found it would not become a case. And even if it was to be found, as long as they cover up how he was killed by violent means like cutting off his fingers or gouging out his eyes it should be treated as a crime related to the mafia.

The problem was with their client. The assignment in killing a killer they received from Genzo. They had planned to follow him and then kill him, but with the help of his partner's slip up they lost their target.

And now it would be difficult for them to find the target with just their ability. So that means it was essential for them to get assistance from Genzo. They had to lure the target out by having him say "I have consolation money for you" or "I'll give you a job again."

Once he explained that idea to Yamamoto, he frivolously nodded in agreement. "Yeah, that's a good plan." He got irritated again at that tone, as

though he did not understand the gravity of the task.

“Anyway, I’ll go talk with the owner.”

Just as he put a hand on the car door, Yamamoto stopped him.

“No, I’ll go. It was my fault anyway.”

Damn right it is, he thought to himself. *It is your fault. You’re terrible at everything. And yet why do I have to clean up your mess?* It peeved him that he had to apologize for his mistakes in losing the target.

“Alright then. You go.” He sent off Yamamoto with a cold voice.

Yamamoto immediately headed to Genzo’s place.

Several minutes later Yamamoto came back to the car. He had a desperate look.

“How’d it go?”

When he was asked that, he slumped his shoulders and answered him.

“He wouldn’t do it. When I told him we killed the wrong guy, he got super mad.”

Abe was speechless at Yamamoto’s statement. “.....Ha?”

“He said, ‘I ain’t givin’ you anymore jobs.’ And ‘dontcha come knockin’ by again.’This sucks.”

“Are you an idiot?!”

He struck Yamamoto on the head.

“Why are you such an idiot!”

“Eh?”

No one said anything about telling him that much. He should not have mentioned they lost the target.

Genzo particularly despised getting unrelated persons caught in the crossfire. Naturally he was furious. *How dare he tell him an unnecessary detail.* Abe grasped his head and leaned onto the wheel.

“.....Why did it get like this?”

He turned pale like earlier. *Why did he not go to Genzo himself? Why did he*

leave it up to Yamamoto? Even as he regretted it, it no longer mattered.

Fifth Inning

Top of Fifth Inning

Banba parked at the coin operated parking lot near Haruyoshi Bridge. He got out of his car and walked down the street aligned with food stalls. Lin followed after him. The characters Genchan for one of the shops could be seen ahead. When they approached they heard a voice yelling.

“You idiots!” It was Genzo’s voice. He sounded incredibly menacing.

“No, like I said, it wasn’t me!” They heard another man speak. “A-Abe senpai confused -”

“Dontcha come knockin’ here again!”

They saw a young man fly out of the shop and run away.

It certainly doesn’t seem peaceful. Just what happened? Banba and Lin looked at each other and tilted their heads.

When they pulled up the curtains hesitantly Genzo was there smiling as usual. “Oh, it’s you guys.”

Banba took a seat. Lin saw an open seat and sat down. After they ordered two bowls of ramen, Genzo swiftly went to soak the noodles in hot water.

“.....Sorry, old man. I failed.” Lin spoke. “Shindou got killed.”

By this guy, he said and pointed to the man next to him with his thumb. Even though he was called the strongest in this city he was still bitter over the fact he could not carry out a request he had taken.

“Dontcha fret over it.” He was worried he would have been as angry as he was just previously, but Genzo was lenient with him. “Your slip up is cute.”

“What happened? Looked like you was in a disagreement earlier.”

When Banba asked him Genzo gave a big sigh. “Two killers I handed out jobs to messed up.”

“Messed up?”

“They gone and killed an unrelated man by mistake.”

“Oh my.”

I see, so that was why he was yelling earlier. So that young guy who ran off earlier must have been him.

“Here you go. Sorry for the wait.” Genzo placed the ramen in front of them.

“Looks delicious.” Banba put his hands together while holding the splittable chopsticks. “Thank you for the meal.”

Lin did the same. “Thank you for the meal.”

“ – Ah, that’s right. Banba.”

That incident in that VIP room. I should tell him about it.

“It seems you’re wanted. By the Kakyuu Group.”

With noodles stuffed into his mouth Banba inclined his head. “Mm?”

“The boss of the Kakyuu Group came to that club. And he brought his subordinates and bodyguards.” He told him the details of the conversation thoroughly. “They said they are getting skilled killers to kill the Niwaka Samurai.”

Even though he informed him of that Banba just murmured disinterestedly. “M-hm.” He did not think he would panic over it, but he thought he should be a little concerned.

“Shouldn’t you avoid doing anything to make you stand out for awhile?”

“What’s this. You worried over me?”

“As if.” He snorted. “If you are being targeted, then my life’s in danger too.”

“It’s alright. You don’t need to fret now.” Banba smiled. This was completely different from Shindou. Even though his life was being targeted he was fairly composed.

“.....Skilled killers, huh.” Genzo frowned. “Is there anyone?”

“They mentioned they’d find some from elsewhere. I guess they’re going to contact some guy called G.G too.”

“G.G?” Banba and Genzo questioned back simultaneously. Both had a slightly shocked expression.

“Is that true?” Banba finally indicated he had interest in what Lin was saying.

“Yeah.” Without a doubt Li had said that.

“Didn’t that G.G retire some ten odd years ago?” Banba looked up at Genzo.

“Yeah, he did.” Genzo nodded.

For these two to know of him, was he that famous of a killer?

“Say.” Lin asked them. “Is this G.G guy strong?”

“Well naturally. They say he’s the strongest killer in generations. Even the Niwaka Samurai ain’t got a chance against him.”

“That ain’t true.” Banba strongly talked back. He may not have wanted to acknowledge there was a stronger killer out there.

Genzo stated in a teasing manner. “There might be a time for you to pay the piper soon as well, Banba.”

“Dontcha tell me that.” Banba snorted. He had a undaunted expression on his face. “I ain’t gonna be upstaged by some geezer.”

“Veterans are rather fearsome to face. No matter what field they are in.”

Lin agreed with Genzo’s statement. The difference in experience sometimes exceeded their difference in ability. It was better to not underestimate them no matter what feats they had done as a killer.

“Putting that aside,” Banba changed the topic. “I’m gonna be off of work for a bit.”

“Haa?” Genzo’s eyes widened. “I haven’t heard lick of this.”

“Well, that begins today after all.”

“.....I forgot.” Genzo came to a realization and gave his understanding. “So it’s the season for that already now?”

Lin was dumbfounded. He was the only one out of the loop. “And what is ‘that’ exactly?”

“It’s the Yamakasa. Yamakasa.”

“And Yamakasa is?”

“You don’t know of Yamakasa?” Banba was taken by great surprise. It was the exact same reaction as when Lin had asked him, ‘what’s a bunt?’

“It’s the Hakata Gion Yamakasa.” Genzo answered him. “It’s a famous festival in Hakata. Men carry a festival float called Kakiyama and run ‘round Hakata City.”

According to Genzo the Hakata Gion Yamakasa was apparently a traditional festival that has been held in Fukuoka for more than 770 years. For Yamakasa there were seven teams divided up by district called *nagare*. There were: Ebisu-nagare, Doi-nagare, Daikoku-nagare, Higashi-nagare, Nakasu-nagare, Nishi-nagare, and Chiyo-nagare. These seven *nagare* teams each carried a float weighing one ton at the festival’s climax, Oiyama, and ran the approximate five kilometer course while shouting ‘*oissa*.’ The starting location was at Kushida Shrine, and the goal was at Susaki City. The festival participants all wear headbands, *mizu-happi*, *shimekomi*, and *jika-tabi*. *It sure seems like a squalid festival*. Lin thought.

“You ain’t never seen it? They suspend normal TV programs for it every year. Around four in the mornin’.”

“As if I’d watch it.” He would be sleeping or working at that time. He did not have the hobby to turn on the TV and watch the broadcasting of some festival.

“And what’s so fun about it?”

“You won’t get none of it.” Banba squinted.

The time for Yamakasa was from today, July 1st until the 15th; Oiyama would take place at dawn of the last day of the festival.

“There are schools and companies that will take off for this time too. They call it the Yamakasa break.”

“What the heck is up with that?” Even though there were people in this country of Japan who work until they collapsed from over exhaustion. And yet there were people that would ditch work just for some festival. *This city is*

messed up. He thought.

“Banba is gonna be in Yamakasa as well, so every year around this time he always takes a break from work.”

“I want to just focus on Yamakasa around this time. It’s like a spiritual cleansing of sorts.”

Genzo frowned. “Still this leaves me in a pinch. I got a lot of work I wanted to give you. What should I oughta do.....”

“Give them to Lin.”

“Haa? Don’t go and propose something so stupid.”

He cursed under his breath. *Why should I have to work in your place while you’re enjoying yourself at a festival?*

Banba grinned at that. “That’s right. I reckon’ it’s something you can’t do.”

“.....What did you say?”

“It’s too much responsibility to bear, right? What my work entails.”

A deep scowl formed on Lin’s forehead at the provocative gaze.

“If you’re saying that, then I guess I’ll do it.” After he raised his voice the corners of his mouth turned up into a grin. “ – Is that what you thought I’d say? I’m not going to be fooled by that.”

Just as he thought he won him over with his cajolery, he was quickly proven wrong.

“He sure became an adult.” Genzo stated with an expression as though looking at his grandchild.

“.....You ain’t cute at all.” Banba pouted, a little bit vexed.

Bottom of Fifth Inning

He was provided an extraordinary weapon that was a Ninja blade and then received training to throw shuriken. Saruwatari could not help but feel his life as a killer was gradually heading down a strange path. Just as he felt concern over what he would be forced to do next, Nitta ordered him to ‘hunt killers.’ To simply kill killers; not by someone’s request. It would be without pay. He was

given a list of killers active in Kitakyushu city and was told to 'kill two or three people off of there.'

So he decided to kill all of them.

The list had the names of the ten freelance killer groups and the addresses to their hideouts on it. Saruwatari aimed to take them out one at a time from the list in ten days. None of the killers were his enemy.

The last on the list was a team of five killers. He laughed that the assassination industry teamed up with this faction of small fry. Saruwatari entered the ash-grey, seven-floored apartment building. It was at a corner in Mihagino, Kokura Ward in Kitakyushu. He could see a cycle racing track nearby. Infiltrating a cheap apartment without an auto-lock feature at the entrance was incredibly simple, and so Saruwatari made it to his designated floor without difficulty.

Their hideout was room 506 of this apartment building. He went out of the elevator once he arrived to the fifth floor. Nitta instructed him to wrap the kerchief around his head like a ninja, but he thought it did not look cool, so he wrapped it around his face below his nose. He hid his face further by wearing a hooded jacket. He had a lot of pockets on the outside and the inside of this jacket with shuriken and kunai in the most he could. *If ninjas were around they would be like this I guess*, Saruwatari laughed at his ridiculous appearance.

He had learned at the company's training course how to pick locks. He easily opened the door to room 506. He entered inside smoothly and quietly closed the door. The layout of the room was as according to the rent information magazine described. It was a one room with a kitchen, dining room, and the bathroom in a separate room from the toilet.

He heard the sound of the shower running. Someone seemed to be in there. Saruwatari headed to the bathroom first. He saw the silhouette of a man through the shower glass screen. Without making a sound he opened the shower door. The man was in the midst of washing his hair and had not taken notice of Saruwatari's presence. He had his head lowered, rinsing off the foam of the shampoo. Saruwatari moved behind him and slashed the ninja sword across the nape of the man's neck. He moved back nimbly so the spurt of blood

did not splash onto him and closed the door. The man's cries were drowned out by the sound of the running water. The man died without knowing what had happened to him and who had killed him.

He had finished off one of them.

It was when he went to move onto the next ones; he got a call. It was from Nitta. He hit the button to accept the call and pressed the phone to his ear. "What's it to you?"

[How is it? Are you making progress with the killer hunting?]

I'm in the middle of it. "Wait a lil' bit more. After these four I'll have finished all of them."

[All of them? You don't mean –]

All the other members were in the living room. When he opened the door into the hallway he would have to face all of them. Going through the trouble of luring each one out and killing them one by one was not his style. Saruwatari kicked the door open vigorously.

The men laying around watching television turned around simultaneously. There were three men. There were two sitting on the sofa and one sleeping on the floor. The last one was taking a call on the balcony while having a smoke.

"Wha-"

The men were dumbfounded with Saruwatari's sudden appearance.

One of the men regained their composure and yelled. "Who the hell are you?!"

It was already too late when he hastily went to grab his gun from his pocket. Saruwatari sliced off the man's right hand. The hand that held the gun dropped to the floor. Seeing the blood spurting out from where it was severed the man turned pale and screamed. *You're loud*, he thought. Since the cheap room has thin walls he wanted to handle this quietly. *What would happen if the neighbors hear?*

"Gwaaa,aa, gah -"

After he added the finishing blow by thrusting the blade into the man's chest

with his right hand the man's screams fell silent.

Saruwatari still had his cell phone in his left hand, and he pressed to his ear.

[It can't be, Sarucchi.] He heard Nitta's shocked voice. [You killed all the killers on the list?]

Now there is two taken out. "Three left."

"Uwaaa! Don't come neaaaar!"

The men in the living room lose their footing. They tried to run away, crawling on the floor desperately. He pierced their hearts through their backs as he watches their pathetic attempts.

[If you do that, there won't be anymore killers in Kokura.]

"Won't that be fine? It'd be peaceful." Saruwatari jokingly commented back.

Now then there is just one left.

He moved his gaze over to the balcony. The door was open, and the man was absent. *Did he get away?* He clicked his tongue. At the same time he heard a sound at the entrance. He saw the man make a run for it, leaving his comrades behind.

"Ah, you there! Wait!"

Saruwatari pursued after the man and rushed out of the room.

"He-ee."

The man dashed towards the elevator. Saruwatari threw a shuriken at the man's back. He continuously threw one, two, and then three shurikens in quick motion. However all of them hit the walls of the apartment and did not even graze his target. The man got onto the elevator in that interval of time and makes his escape.

".....Ah, dammit. He got away." He muttered quietly.

[What's wrong?] Nitta spoke up. He was still on the phone.

"I didn't kill one of them."

[That's not a big deal. Let him go. It'd be better that way.]

“Better off?”

[It’s easier for rumors to start with an eyewitness.] Nitta exclaimed cheerfully. [But still, you finished that in a blink of an eye. As expected of the former ace of Murder Inc. at their Tokyo headquarters. You’re doing terrific even in Kitakyushu.]

“Not really.” Saruwatari answered plainly. “All of them was weak.”

[Naturally small fry of just five people don’t stand a chance against a genius like you.]

“.....So, how long should I keep going? Doing this (killer hunting).”

In truth he had enough. Even though his opponents were all killers they were guys with no spine. Nothing had changed since his time in the company like this. He simply tormented the weak.

[It is vital to create a reputation steadily like this.Well, I bet some organization should be starting to keep an eye out for you now.] Nitta made a profound statement.

“Didn’t you guys mess up? I heard from Genzo-san.” A plump, middle-aged woman working at the lottery stand laughs. From his perspective she was a well off mediator. In between selling scraps of paper filled with dreams she handed out jobs to killers as well.

However, she did not hand over any to Abe.

“We won’t hire some blockheads who mistake the target. Go somewhere else.”

The mediator Genzo was someone with fairly well influence in this industry it seems. Yamamoto’s mistake spread to all the mediators in Fukuoka in the blink of an eye, and the two were kicked out. They went around searching for work in Fukuoka city, but they could not find any mediators who would give them work.

Being turned away by the last one, Abe slumped his shoulders and headed back to the car. The white van he had parked at a parking garage near Canal City has dents on its front and its sides. They were the traces of the accident Yamamoto caused. And he was dozing off in the passenger’s seat lazily. It had

been some time since he first started living in his car, but he felt depressed coming back to it as of late. He felt as though he was walking around with the knife he stabbed a person with and was at unease. He had wanted to do repairs soon or buy a new car from a auto theft dealer, but now he did not have the money for it. He did not have a job now. More so, he felt the desire to set the car and his partner on fire to dispose of them both.

After Abe opened the door and sate down in the driver's seat, Yamamoto woke up. ".....Ah, how'd it go? Did you get any work?" He asked him drowsily.

"It was no use." He glared at Yamamoto from the side as he answered him. *He's an unsensible man. Even though someone is moving around with their head hanging low he just sleeps while drooling.*

"Is that so?" Yamamoto whispered and placed the cigarette stuffed with weed into his mouth as always. Even though he scolded him to quit it with the drugs he did not adhere to it.

I'm at the end of my patience, he thought.

".....Yamamoto." Finally the time came for him to say what he wanted to someday. "I won't do any more work with you."

Yamamoto raised his voice stupidly. "Heh?"

"This is the end of our partnership."

"N-no waay." Yamamoto's complexion changed. He exclaimed in a pathetic voice. "Don't throw me out."

"I haven't received anything good being with you."

It was an encumbrance to say it openly. If it was going to be like this he would have been fine always doing things alone and not have looked for a partner. He felt nothing but regret. He had always been a man with a lot of patience, but he thought even for him he had enough.

"But without you I can't do anything." Yamamoto was half in tears.

And why is that my problem? He laughed back.

Yamamoto falls silent. After a few moments, he spoke.

“.....If you’re gonna end our partnership, I’ll go to the police.”

“Ha?”

“I’ll tell the police you’re a murderer.” His eyes were glassy. Who knew he would threaten him. This was beyond his expectations.

“If you do that you know you won’t get off either, right?”

“I know.”

No matter how intelligent Yamamoto is, he would not do something so foolish, right? But it is this idiot. He could do something unbelievable by chance. There is the one in a million chance.

Somehow he had gotten into a troublesome situation. Abe made a big sigh and dropped the topic. *So do I have to continue this relationship with Yamamoto and have him tail me around again?*

He was irritated. That could be because of his empty stomach. His stomach rumbled in the stillness of the car. He had not had a proper meal lately. He considered going out to buy something to eat.

“Shit.” He looked into his wallet and cursed. He had no money. “With this I can’t even buy anything to eat.”

At that Yamamoto spoke up.

“I’ll go buy something.”

Abe tilted his head at Yamamoto’s statement. This man should be penniless too. *Does he have a hidden stash somewhere?*

“Please wait here for a bit.” Yamamoto told him and went off to purchase food.

Translations Notes:

1. Mizu-happi: “water vests.” They are worn only for the carrying of the Kakiyama.
Shimekomi: the sumo-wrestler ‘belt.’
Jikatabi: A type of outdoor footwear
2. Oiyama: A race among the seven districts in Hakata.

3. [Check out more about the Hakata Gion Yamakasa festival here.](#)

Sixth Inning

Top of Sixth Inning

Banba had stated that he would not work, but he did exactly as he claimed he would. During Yamakasa Banba would not do any killings or any work for the detective office. There were days he would be gone early in the morning, and days he would be sleeping all morning. There were times he would go out after noon or in the evening and come back drunk. He would wear a traditional coat called a *happi* and a *shimekomi* nearly half naked and depart exultantly. *Just what on earth does he do? According to Genzo the Yamakasa participants at this time should be busy training to head for Oiyama. But he sure is putting a lot of effort into this festival crap.* Lin was amazed.

When Lin woke up Banba had already left for today as well. And he left his worn pajamas scattered around. Even when night fell Banba still had not returned. Just as he turned on the television and was going to watch the night news program a guest came to the office.

It was Kumiko Izuku.

The report of their findings into her affair should be on the 14th. *There should still be time until the appointed date, so what does she want?* Since Banba was absent he had to deal with her. Lin, while annoyed, brought Kumiko inside and had her take a seat.

Just as he was pouring her a cup of barley tea, Kumiko began to speak. “My husband hasn’t come home.”

“.....Ha?”

“At the end of last month, he left saying he had a business trip and hasn’t come back. And everyone else at the company has said he has been absent without permission.....And they said my husband didn’t have a business trip planned to begin with.” Kumiko muttered resentfully. “.....It has to be that woman.”

“That woman?”

“The woman in the photo. He eloped with that woman.” Her expression was filled with malice.

If her husband disappeared shouldn't she be anxious over his well being if he got into a situation first? And yet without any basis for it she immediately suspects he's cheating. What a terrible wife.

“I'll tell you now.” Feeling pity for her husband Tadafumi, Lin insisted on his innocence in his place. “Your husband isn't cheating on you. He wasn't a customer at that club. He was working part-time there as a driver.”

Kumiko frowned. “.....Part-time?”

“He has a job bringing the girls back to their homes. That picture was from one of those times too.”

Kumiko had her head tilted to the side with an expression as though saying, ‘why would he have a part-time job?’, so Lin sympathized with him more. *Isn't it because you're not making any money? How pathetic.* He wanted to say.

“Even though it's for a part-time job, that doesn't mean he isn't cheating.” Kumiko objected.

That's true.

When she mentioned that he could certainly see it. There was the possibility he met a young woman and fell in love with that part-time job. But Lin had already wrapped up the investigation early, having decided her husband was innocent.

Kumiko persistently suspected he was cheating on her. *Is that a wife's intuition? Or does she have a distrusting personality to begin with? She is annoying.*

“At any rate, please look for my husband.”

“Shouldn't you send in a investigation request to the police?”

“I already am doing that. Do you know how many people go missing everyday? It's not like the police will look for him personally.”

Her domineering attitude did not sit well with him, so he thought of refusing. But he could not make the decision on this. He was told from the head that they

had to accept any job.

“Can you handle the extra fee?”

“Keep it as cheap as you can.”

He told her he would make contact with her once he knew something and sent Kumiko away. Now he got another needless job.

Alone again in the office, Lin called up a certain person.

An informant for troublesome times.

Enokida was currently near Canal City, so they decided to meet up at a diner in one of the cafeterias.

“This is rare; getting a call from you.” When Lin arrived Enokida was already waiting. He asked him while sipping his oolong tea, “where’s Banba-san?”

“He’s off for the Yamakasa break.” He took a seat on the other side of him and answered his question.

“Ah, is that so? It’s already that season, huh.”

Enokida was eating pork shogayaki. After Lin orders the same meal as him he said in a murmur, “why does he go so far just for some festival.”

“It can’t be helped. Banba-san is the typical *nobosenmon* after all.”

“*Nobosenmon*?”

“The type of guy who get fired up for festivals or competitions.”

He agreed. He certainly got like that during baseball games too.

“Speaking of Banba-san,” Enokida changed the topic. He said in a cheerful tone. “I heard from Gen-san. Seems he’s being hunted down by the Kakyuu Group.”

“And despite that he is only thinking about the festival and is drinking every day.That guy lacks a sense of danger.”

“That’s quite like Banba-san. He goes at his own pace.”

He wanted to make clear it was not like he cared what would happen to Banba, but he could not do that. He recalled the time he met Banba back in

November of last year. At that time, Lin was still a killer under the Kakyuu Group. When his sister was killed he had tried to seek out revenge against the company, but he fell for their trap and found himself in a predicament. The one who had saved him was Banba.

He felt responsibility towards him. The Niwaka Samurai being targeted by the Kakyuu Group was his fault. And so he could not pretend not to see this case involving him.

“I have to do something about it.”

He would not let Banba get killed. He planned to fulfill that obligation, and Lin also had his pride. He could not back away from this debt. He decided that no matter what kind of assassin came after him he would beat them in turn. However, even if he killed one there would just be another assassin to appear. There would be no end to it. After all, the hired killers were limitless for the organization. Preferably he may have to break the chain by killing the one on top.

“.....Hey, mushroom.” He asked him with a serious expression. “Do you think I could kill Long Fang Wang?”

Could he face off against the Kakyuu Group the way he was right now; he wanted the informant’s objective opinion.

“Wouldn’t that be hard?” Enokida’s answer was honest. “You should know the force of Wang’s bodyguards yourself, right? Since you used to be one of them.”

In general wherever Long Fang Wang went several guards follow suite. They were incredibly skilled gunmen who used to be killers. The only time Wang would be alone was when he met with his lovers in a hotel. Naturally even his guards would not be so uncouth as to be in the bedroom with them.

The man Long Fang Wang liked women to an abnormal degree, making numerous lovers. If he could just make use of that weakness –

Lin recalled the hostess at the club: the woman with the hostess name, Yuri. He had heard that Wang had taken quite the affection towards her. *Does he have a preference for women like that?* When he peeked into the VIP room Yuri

was unmistakably beautiful. Her hair was neat, and she thoroughly maintained her nails. Her makeup was moderate, and her supple lips coated in a beige lipstick were voluptuous. From what he could see she was not too young. She seemed to be just before her thirties. And so she had a kind of reserved almost classy aesthetic to her. He considered her to be a nice looking woman for making good profits.

However, from his perspective he was out of that league. He heard that Wang went through the hostesses there. If he could get close to him, he probably could get invited over with ease. In actuality Wang had shown interest in him at that time.

“Ahh, that’d be impossible.” Enokida after listening to what Lin had to say shot down his idea readily.

Lin was sullen. “Why’s that?”

“Before the two are left alone in a hotel, Wang’s lover has to go through a full body exam. They are stripped down in front of his subordinates, and they pat them down and elaborately check to see if they have any hidden weapons on their person.”

“They go that far?That’s rather extreme.”

“There’s a reason for that. A female killer in the past thought the same thing as you and had tried to kill Wang. She seduced him to get his attention and managed to set up a time for them to be together, but during the body check at the hotel they found a knife hidden in her skirt.”

“.....And then.” He pressed for more. “What happened to her?”

“On top of getting gang raped by his subordinates they cut out her guts and fed her remains to the pigs.”

He was taken aback. He did not know how much of that was true. But for a man that was also the head of the Kakyuu Group it would not be far off for all of it to be true.

“In your case you’ll be out as soon as they remove your clothes. And immediately you’d be made into a pig’s course.” Enokida picked up a slice of the pork shogayaki and stuffed it in his mouth. He laughed while he chewed. “And

the pig that would eat you could end up being served to me as a delicious delicacy like this.”

Imagining that he felt sick.

“And the chance that Long Fang Wang is into guys?”

“Probably none. He does dabble with women indiscriminately, but his striking zone is not very wide. And so the killers after Wang are mainly women. It’s easy for them to get close to him.”

Enokida shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, even in the one in a million chance he was interested, it’d be difficult. Even if you were fortunate enough to manage getting alone together, you’d be at a disadvantage. Wang is a skilled killer as well, and since he has such a muscular body even if you tried to kill him bare handed you wouldn’t last a chance against him with your strength.”

“Could I use something in the hotel room to kill him?”

“His subordinates would clear out the room for any lethal weapons in advance. Even a razor or a dryer. Even the cord for the TV.”

“If I could hide a weapon where they can’t find it on my person, then would I be able to?”

“They would find it at every part of your body though?”

Would they go that far? His eyes widened.

“If you were a street performer who could spit out a knife you swallowed freely that’d work.”

Just as Enokida said, assassinating Wang would be severely difficult. It seemed he could only be prepared for the assassins the Kakyuu Group would send right now.

“You should be worried for yourself and not just Banba-san as well.” Enokida suddenly gave him a warning. “It seems killer hunting is abuzz recently.”

“Killer hunting?”

“Yeah. I guess there’s a freelance killer like you going around killing new killers

in the Kitakyushu area. Without being hired to do so.”

Carrying out killings without receiving any money. He could not comprehend that. “And why would someone do that?”

“Who knows. Maybe to lessen the amount of rivals or to make his name more known..... Or perhaps he’s just a lunatic who loves killing through and through.”

“What kind of person is that killer?”

“Some call him the Submarine Ninja. It seems they gave him that name since he throws shuriken with an under throw.”

“What a ridiculous killer.” After he said that he recalled that there was a more ridiculous killer he was familiar with.

Finishing his food, Enokida moved back to the main topic. “Now then, what did you need from me?”

He had completely forgot what his original objective was. Lin took out a photo and handed it over to Enokida. “Look up this guy’s whereabouts. His name is Tadafumi Izuku. An ordinary person.”

He took stock. He cleaned. And he said “welcome” cheerfully in greeting. He worked on the register, took the money, and handed back the change and receipt. He bowed his head and said, “thank you very much.”

It was a scene that happens everywhere, but to Saitou it was an irreplaceable moment. He wanted to spend his peaceful days in normalcy and tranquility. His job as a convenience store clerk was one Saitou had sought for.

Saitou’s part-time job was near Canal City in Nakasu. The store was marked by its blue, white and green design. His shift was from eleven at night until five in the morning. His hourly wage was 900 yen. The pay was three times less than his previous job, but it was far better than the risks involved in trespassing the law.

There were very few customers in the dead of night at the convenience store. He had a lot of spare time and was often lost in thought. While setting up stock silently, Saitou thought back to his life the year before. Back when he was still

an employee of Murder Inc. Saitou had failed his first job at the Tokyo headquarters he belonged to. He was then transferred to Fukuoka and had to carry out his next assignment. He was caught by avengers, was almost tortured by them, and then somehow ended up wanted for a series of rape cases and murders by mistake. So now being able to live a normal life like this could only be called a miracle.

There was the chime of a melody, indicating a customer came into the store. Saitou stopped what he was working on and headed to the register.
“Welcome.”

Saitou immediately took notice of an irregularity with the customer. The person who entered was a man wearing work clothes. He could assume he was a man from his physique. However, he was wearing a ski mask that kept his face hidden.

No matter how he looked it, it was a robbery.

The man took out a knife and pointed the tip towards Saitou.

“Give me the money!”

Just as he thought, it was a robbery.

He placed a black bag in front of Saitou. “Put all the money from the register in here!”

“Y-yes!” Saitou’s shoulders shook, and he answered in less than a moment.

He found it pathetic he was obeying so obediently. However, his life was more important than the store’s money. He opened the register and stuffed the cash into the bag.

In that time the robber picked up a basket in one hand and loitered through the store. *What is this robber?* Saitou kept a watch on him. *Does he plan on shopping normally?*

After awhile the robber took the basket filled with food and drink like onigiri and plastic water bottles to the register and told him, “put these in with it.” So on top of stealing money he was stealing the store’s products as well. This robber was shameless.

After he put the products into the bag the chime rang again. Another customer walked in. It was a man this time as well. He was wearing a black suit with a necktie neatly tied. He was wearing sunglasses with a sharp design on them like ones a sports player would wear. Even though it was the middle of July, right now this man was wearing a trench coat. He was a customer he was familiar with. He was a regular who only ever buys coffee. He had a characteristic getup, so it left an impression on him.

Even though the customer saw the robbery going on his complexion did not change in the slightest. And without hesitation he walked towards the counter.

“Please move.” The regular customer in the trench coat told the robber. It was a low pitched voice with a grimness to it.

“Ah? What did you say?” The robber threatened him.

Ignoring that the customer told Saitou. “Cigarettes please. The 48th one over there.”

“You’re in the way! Go over there!”

The robber swung the weapon at the customer.

“Likewise,” the man grabbed him by the arm. “You’re in my way of purchasing my items.”

He then twisted his arm, and the robber gave out an uncouth yelp. “Ow-ow-ow-ow.” His palm loosened its grip, and the knife dropped to the floor. The customer kicked that away towards the center of the store.

The robber, now unarmed, cursed. “Shit!” He grabbed the thousand yen bill and onigiri before dashing out of the store. He turned tail and ran.

“Ah, wait.”

Saitou quickly grabbed a paintball left at the register and chased after him. The robber was ahead of him by twenty meters. Saitou took his stance and made a pitch at his back. It was a straight pitch thrown with all his might. The paintball hit the robber square in the back and burst open. The paint splattered on his clothes, dying them an orange color. The robber disappeared into a narrow alley shortly after.

“.....U-um.” Once Saitou returned to the store he bowed his head to the trench coat man. “Thank you for saving me.”

“No, it was nothing.”

“What is your name?”

“I’m not someone worthy enough to give a name,” the man answered. “.....Is what I want to say.”

He moved his gaze towards Saitou’s chest. His name tag was attached on his left side. The characters Saitou were written on it.

“Though since I know your name, I feel it would be a bit unfair for you not to know mine.”

“Ha-haa.....” Is that what this is?

“My name is Gondo.” The man offered his name. “George Gondo.”

What a unique name. Is he half Japanese? He pondered in his mind.

“Gondo-san, thank you very much. Is there anything I can -”

“No, it’s alright.” Gondo said and raised his palms up towards Saitou.

Saitou went to take the coffee he always bought from the refrigerator shelf and handed it over to him with the specified cigarettes he wanted. “Here you go. This is my treat.”

Gondo accepted Saitou’s courtesy in earnest. “Now then, without further ado.”

He put the canned coffee into his pocket, turned over the cuffs of his trench coat and departed in a gallant fashion. Saitou watched him leave for a bit, but then he returned to himself upon recalling. *That’s right. I encountered a robber. I have to report this to the police.*

Bottom of Sixth Inning

Yamamoto had left, cheerfully saying he would go shopping, but two hours later he came back to the car with a disheartened expression.

“Where did you go?”

“I went to a nearby convenience store to withdraw some money.....” He handed over a crumbled thousand yen bill and a *kombu* flavored onigiri to Abe. “Here you go.”

For some reason Yamamoto’s clothes were dyed an orange color from his back to his rear.

“When you went to withdraw money at the convenience store, how did you get your clothes so dirty?”

“Well, um.....” He stuttered.

He asked once more. “Where did you try and withdraw money from?”

“.....From the register.”

Abe held his head in his hands. “Why are you that much of an idiot.”

“But we needed money.....”

Actually now thinking about it, this guy used to be a convenience store robber, he recalls. “They didn’t see your face, right?”

“.....Maybe.”

Yamamoto’s explanation was after that. He kept watch of the convenience store until there was a moment the store employee was alone before proceeding with the robbery. He threatened the store attendant with a knife and had him stuff the bag with money. He then added food to it. And then a strange man wearing a trench coat came in and took away his knife. At a loss, Yamamoto snatched the thousand yen bill and onigiri and ran away at full speed. Once he ran twenty sum meters away he had thought he managed to escape. However, he was hit with a paintball by the shop attendant with incredible aim. That is what he told him.

How much of it was true or part of Yamamoto’s exaggeration he could not tell. Or how much of it was one of his delusions. He did not know, but he did something outrageous. Going through with robberies and only gain onigiri and a thousand yen was not worth it.

Thinking it was pointless to say anything more to this man, Abe held his tongue. He opened the newspaper while stuffing his face with the stolen onigiri.

“What are you reading?” Yamamoto peeked over.

“Are you stupid enough you can’t understand by looking? A newspaper, you got it? A paper that has news on cases and accidents.”

“I know at least that much.” Yamamoto pouted. “You’ve been reading the newspaper a lot recently, so I wondered if there is some funny four panel comic or something.”

Abe had been checking the newspaper without fail since the day Yamamoto accidentally killed the man and they had thrown him into the sea. He was curious if they had found the body or not.

“Ah,” Yamamoto caught a glimpse at the paper from the side and pointed to a certain article. “Here.”

What caught Yamamoto’s interest was a small article about an identity fraud case.

The culprit of it impersonated a member of a male idol group and apparently sent false e-mails to fans which read, ‘if I get a substantial reward, I will give worn-out underwear’ to try and earn large amounts of cash. The culprit was caught. The underwear the fans paid for and received were from some unsatisfying unemployed male in his fifties. Abe was shocked to see there were people who fell for this fraud. *I guess the world is filled with nothing but idiots. And they want underwear that much?*

Yamamoto’s eyes were alight. “I thought of something good!”

“Something good?” He could not rejoice when Yamamoto said anything ‘good.’

“Let’s impersonate someone!”

“Ha?”

“We can make a post on the net for jobs. And impersonate as a famous killer. There’s that ‘Niwaka Samurai,’ right? We should get a ton of jobs coming in that way.”

There were numerous people who made posts for jobs on underground websites. There were several made in a single day. If they used the famous

Niwaka Samurai name they should get clients to take the bait. Since an unemployed old guy could impersonate an idol, they could impersonate the Niwaka Samurai. But even if they get jobs there was one problem.

“Do you think we can handle the jobs the Niwaka Samurai gets?”

“Then we don’t do them. We can take only the advance payment and just flee after that.”

“That’s fraud.”

“It is. It’s advance pay fraud.”

“That’s an incredible crime.” After he told him this he realized the abnormality in what he said. *Am I saying that killing is good and fraud is bad now?*

“It’s fine. Please leave it to me.” Yamamoto took out his smartphone and opened a certain website.

And on the job application forum he wrote, ‘Awaiting to accept murder requests for one hundred thousand yen, exact. Niwaka Samurai.’

“.....What’s with this wording?”

“Isn’t it better to say ‘await’?”

First they would do exchanges on a free e-mail service with the person who looked at the post and made contact with them. They would decide on a day and time to meet in person and have them prepare the advance money for then. After they took the payment they would delete their address and cover their tracks. That was Yamamoto’s plan.

He did not think it would go well, but a few minutes later they got someone interested in Yamamoto’s post as the Niwaka Samurai.

“Will you do try-outs for the Kakyuu Group?” Nitta said that to him in the evening. An organization interested in Saruwatari appeared as he was proceeding with the killer hunting. They were a multinational mafia called the Kakyuu Group.

The meeting with the Kakyuu Group was today at ten thirty in the afternoon. The location was at a club in Nakasu called Eve. He took an express train on the

Kagoshima Main Line from JR Kokura Station to Araki and from there headed to Hakata. And from there he took a taxi to Nakasu.

When Saruwatari arrived at the facility he was guided into the center room. It appeared to be a private room used as a VIP room and was first-class with a sofa and table.

There were two men in the room already. One was a young man with dreadlocks. He was sitting on the sofa and gulping down a whiskey. He was dressed like a cowboy. His hat had its flanges curved and was hanging from his neck, and he had a gun belt around his waist with revolvers on both sides.

The other was a middle-aged man wearing a trench coat even though it was summer. He was standing in the center of the room patiently. He had sunglasses on.

Is this a gathering for the oddballs now? He wondered. Both of these men were likely killers called in by the Kakyuu Group just like Saruwatari.

Saruwatari sits down with his back against the wall near the entrance of the room.

“.....We still got some time it looks like.”

The cowboy-like man suddenly spoke up.

“How about we introduce ourselves to kill time.” The man suggested and gave his name. “My name is Riku Makishimo. Have you heard of me? The Two-Hand Gun Ricky?”

He had never heard of him.

Is he really famous? He doesn't look like anyone special, Saruwatari snorted.

“And you?”

Ricky asked Saruwatari. After ignoring it and a few moments of silence he muttered quietly, “You're a boring guy.”

As if I'm stupid enough to give information on myself so easily, he assumed silence, yet the other man kept talking.

“Even though I know your name I feel it would be a bit unfair for you not to

know mine.” The man in the trench coat also gave his name. “I’m George Gondo. I’m often called G.G.”

“What?” Ricky was stunned upon hearing that and his eyes widened. “G.G you say?”

He quickly stood up from his spot and approached the man.

“You serious? Like the legend? Are you really G.G? Whoa, this is the first I’ve seen of you! I thought you would be more like an old man, but you are surprisingly young! Ah, could I shake your hand?”

– What is this man getting all excited over?

“G.G?” Saruwatari whispered and tilted his head. It was a name he had never heard of before.

At that Ricky’s eyes pop out of his head.

“You don’t know him? G.G is super famous! He’s the strongest killer in Fukuoka history! A coelacanth in the killer industry!”

He approaches Saruwatari and peers at his face.

“Are you really one of us if you don’t know of G.G? Ah, could it be you’re a newcomer?”

It was with a belittling tone. *This guy pisses me off*. When that thought passed through his mind it was already too late.

“Shut your trap.” His left fist sunk into the man’s face.

“He-bu”

Being punched in the face suddenly, Ricky gave an uncouth cry. He then fell backwards and remained unmoving. He seemed to have lost conscious.

At that moment the door to the private room opened and a man in a suit appeared. He was a slim, bespectacled man. “Sorry to have kept you waiting,” he says and bows his head.

He spotted the fallen Ricky and asked. “What happened to this person?”

“I did that.” Saruwatari answered honestly. “He stopped moving with just one punch.”

“Throw him outside.” The man ordered the underlings standing in the hallway. “We have no need for a killer who faints from a single punch.”

After Ricky was carried outside the man introduced himself. “My apologies. My name is Li. I work as the advisor to the president of the Kakyuu Group.”

He immediately started to discuss the job for them.

“At this time, the three of you – no, the two of you gathered here are to kill a certain killer.”

“And the certain killer is?”

“The Niwaka Samurai – he is a killer of killers, rumored to be the strongest in Hakata.”

Li added more.

“The advance payment is 100,000,000 yen. We will also pay a contingency fee to the one who succeeds in accomplishing this task. If you kill the Niwaka Samurai it will be 200,000,000; if you bring him in alive it will be 500,000,000. And if you wish for more there is the possibility to sign an exclusive contract with the Kakyuu Group.”

100,000,000 for just the advance payment is extraordinary conditions.

“More than paying us in advanced for the two of us,” Saruwatari chimed in. “Wouldn’t it better to have us brawl and give the job to the winner?”

It would save them money that way. And with such a setup he wanted to fight this G.G guy. That was all to it.

Li shook his head to both sides. “What we are searching for is not just strong killers but killers capable of carrying out the job.”

He then gave out orders to his subordinates, and they put leg bands on Saruwatari’s and G.G’s right leg. They resembled the ones put on criminals in foreign countries. They probably featured a GPS in them.

“It would be troublesome to have you just take the advanced payment and run away. Once you complete the job the lock will unlatch, so please rest assured.”

He left with these final words, “there is no time limit. You can take as much time as you need. Just as long as you carry out the job it will suffice.” It seemed the discussion was over now.

After Saruwatari left Club.Eve and had a meal at a Tonkotsu Ramen shop, he headed to Hakata Station. He took the normal train heading to Moji Port. He ended up falling asleep at some point as he was leaning against the door while standing.

At one point the train car shook greatly with a loud banging sound. His body was jerked harshly, and Saruwatari immediately woke up. He looked at his current location in haste, thinking he missed his stop. The train had left Chihaya Station and was currently stopped at Kashii Station. He still had more than an hour to Kokura. He closed his eyes thinking of getting more sleep, but recalling what Li had said he no longer felt tired.

The Niwaka Samurai – the strongest killer of killers in Fukuoka.

How strong is he? He wondered to himself about the formidable enemy yet to be seen. He had no fear for it. He was just anticipating it. His whole heart screamed, ‘I want to fight soon.’

The time to go through with their advanced payment fraud had come.

Yamamoto took off to do something and returned to the car an hour later.

“Where did you go?”

“I stole this.”

He was taken aback seeing what he pulled out of the bag. “What is this?”

“It’s the impersonating samurai set.” Yamamoto answered proudly. “I shoplifted at Don Quijote.”

It was costume goods often used for program banquets. The set consisted of a topknot styled wig, a samurai hakama outfit, a kimono, and a toy Japanese sword.

Does he really plan on pretending to be the Niwaka Samurai with these? He thought in exasperation.

Yamamoto put on the ‘impersonating samurai set’ and proudly asked him.

“How is it? Do I look like the Niwaka Samurai?”

“You only look like mister idiot to me.”

Glancing at his partner’s ridiculous form Abe sighed. *This just looks like he’s an improvised samurai. There is no way it’ll go well like this. Anyone would be suspicious and see through that he’s a fake. Only Yamamoto would try something so foolish.*

The appointed time was drawing near. Their client was already waiting for them at the meetup place in a narrow alleyway. She was an ordinary woman who did not appear to know anything of the underground.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.” He bowed his head and recited phrases suited for a business meeting. “I am the manager, Abe. And he is the killer the Niwaka Samurai.”

Please stay quiet, he poked Yamamoto in the side with his elbow to get his meaning across.

From her story the woman wanted the assassination of an ordinary person.

“Please kill this woman.” She said and pointed to the photo. “She was a hostess working at a club called Eve.”

The woman shown in the photo certainly looked like a hostess.

“And the payment for it?”

“I have it prepared. Here you go.” She handed over a brown envelope to Abe. He checked its contents and saw the promised 100,000 yen in cash inside. Yamamoto initially suggested to have the amount be 300,000 yen, but Abe turned it down. He told him if the price was too high there was the possibility of them being doubted for fraud. A price that one could pay if they tried a little was just fine.

“Well then,” Abe finished their conversation. “When it is finished we will contact you at the usual address.”

“Thank you. I leave it to you then.” The client bows her head.

They depart from her and got into the car to get away. Starting the car, Abe exhaled.

“.....You’re kidding me.” He could not believe it. “We succeeded.”

Without any effort they managed to earn 100,000 yen.

Translation Notes:

1. Submarine – This is a term used to describe a pitch released just above the ground. Though from what I read it usually is not thrown underhanded.
2. Saruwatari could potentially have been inspired by professional baseball player Shunsuke Watanabe, who is known as Mr. Submarine in Japan. He is known for having the world’s lowest release point, releasing the ball nearly 2 inches off the ground.

The names are similar too. Shunsuke Watanabe (渡辺 俊介, *watanabe shunsuke*) and Shunsuke Saruwatari (猿渡俊助, *saruwatari shunsuke*).

3. Kombu/konbu – An edible kelp that is widely eaten in East Asia.
4. Don Quijote (ドン・キホーテ) – A discount chain store in Japan. It is often just referred to as Donki (ドンキ)

Seventh Inning

Top of Seventh Inning

When Lin woke up that day Banba was nowhere to be seen as usual. He seemed to have already left. *Yamakasa sure is a troublesome festival.* He considered deeply.

He tossed the clothes Banba took off and scattered around into the laundry basket. Even though he kept telling him to clean up a little, that man did not listen.

He turned on the TV. The morning news program was streaming right about now. It seemed they found a man's body in Hakata Bay. His personal belongings were not on his person, so they were still in the middle of finding out his identity. The next program was the sports corner. One of the local stars was high in spirits and was rejoicing in the Hawks' Victory from the previous day. He felt like he was watching Banba.

Before he knew it, it was already nighttime after he had cleaned the office and watched television. *Guess I should go out and get some food.* Just as he was about to put on makeup the door to the office opened.

The one who appeared was Kumiko Izuku.

You again? He thought irritatingly.

Assuming she came to press for the results into the investigation, Lin answered before she asked. "If it's about the whereabouts of your husband, we're still in the middle of investigating."

He had yet to receive a call from Enokida. Since he told her he would contact her once he has a lead, he had tried to chase her away. However.

"That isn't it." Kumiko shook her head. "I came for a different matter."

".....A different matter?" *You came to give me more bothersome work again.* Lin openly scowls at her.

"I experienced fraud. I was tricked by a man called the Niwaka Samurai."

– The Niwaka Samurai.

Lin's eyes widened at the mention of a name he did not expect to fall from her lips. "Ha?"

"Please don't tell the police."

Kumiko said and with a calm demeanor began to explain what had happened.

Kumiko had no doubt in believing her husband's disappearance was due to the woman that was with him in that photo. And then her resentment grew to the point she considered killing the woman. However, she was hesitant soiling her own hands. And at the time she came to know of the existence of an underground website from an acquaintance of hers. It was a suspicious website called Undergroundjobs.com Fukuoka Version.

Kumiko had searched for a killer on the job application bulletin board on there. She then contacted the cheapest killer available. She was told, 'we will meet with you directly and listen to your request. At that time we want you to bring 100,000 yen in cash as advance payment,' and did just that.

The killers were a group of two with one being a samurai-like man called the Niwaka Samurai. The other was the manager Abe. She requested for the woman's murder, handed over the payment and left. That was around one in the morning. She had received no form of contact since then. When she sent an e-mail asking about the progress, she received an error sending it. That was when Kumiko realized she had been tricked. However, given the context she could not inform the police about this. Unable to consult anyone and puzzled on what to do, in the end she visited this office.

Kumiko mentioned again for good measure. "Please, don't say anything to the _"

"I won't."

I wouldn't in the first place.

"Since they were suspicious men, I followed them and took pictures secretly." Kumiko took out photos from her brand bag. It showed two men getting into a white van.

“.....You really are suited for detective work.”

Kumiko stated her third request. “Please take back the money from these men.”

“ – Say, do you know of G.G?”

Nguyen asked him suddenly while he was slurping his ramen next to him. The place was at a ramen shop near the Gates Building the same as last time. It was Enokida who had called for him this time.

“I know of him. He’s the legendary killer, right?”

“That’s right. Seems his real name is George Gondo.”

“.....That’s a first for me.”

“An acquaintance of mine said he met him in person.”

“Didn’t he retire?”

“Who knows. Maybe he resumed work.”

Enokida changed the topic. “I figured out the man’s location you had asked for. He is living in an apartment in the Hakata ward. Here’s his address.”

Though he said he figured it out, in truth he had known from the beginning. He handed over the note with Saitou’s address written on it. He gave his thanks, and after finishing his ramen he left the store.

Enokida took out his smartphone and made a call to Saitou. The ringing continued. After a while he heard the audio guidance start. [Your call is connecting to voicemail.] Saitou did not answer. Now that he thought about it, he recalled him saying he started working a part-time job at a convenience store at night. Then perhaps he was still in the middle of work. For the meantime he decided to leave a voice message.

[Please leave a message after the beep.]

“Ah, hello? Saitou-kun? It’s Enokida. To tell you the truth, you’ll be getting into some trouble soon. Well, to put it simply, a killer is going to your apartment. To kill you. So, good luck.”

After that he proceeded to make a call to another person. As he was

wondering if he was available, he picked up the call soon after. [Hello.]

“Mar-san? It’s me.”

[Ohh, Enokida. What’s up?]

“I figured out a lot of information on that hit-and-run case. It seems that car was a stolen vehicle. The plate number was also fake.”

[So for there to be a fake plate, they must be someone working in the underground, right?]

“Probably. I haven’t found the stolen vehicle abandoned, so that means the culprit may still have it. And from what I saw from the accident there should be dents on the car’s front left side and scratches on both sides. I’ll send you a detailed photo and data in an e-mail later.”

[Thank you. You’re a big help.]

Enokida dropped the call and lifted the ramen to his mouth. He slurped the broth as he was typing on his smartphone. Looking up what was going on in Fukuoka day to day while having a meal was Enokida’s daily schedule.

He spotted something that peaked his interest glancing at the local news. It was a follow-up report on case about a body found in Hakata Bay. The body had been identified as Tadafumi Izuku.

Tadafumi Izuku – he wondered if he had heard that name before somewhere. Actually, it was the same name of the man Lin had asked him to ‘look for his whereabouts.’ It did not appear it was a scenario of a different person with the same family name and first name..

Enokida muttered. “.....He’s dead.”

The meetup place with his client was at a jazz bar alongside the river in Nakasu. The client appointed it. When Jiro arrived to the bar, his client was already waiting. She seemed to be a young woman in her early twenties. She was sitting at the end of the counter with a listless expression. Jiro took a seat next to her.

Her name was Kaori. It seemed that was her hostess name. He heard the client wished for vengeance of her lover whom had been murdered.

After Jiro received the beverage he ordered, Kaori went straight to the topic at hand.

“.....Are you aware of the body they had found in Hakata Bay?”

“Yes.” Jiro nodded. He had just seen the news about it.

“That was my lover.”

Kaori’s gaze dropped downward. “Although I say lover, what we had was adultery.” She expresses in sorrow.

“He was the driver at the club I work at. We would talk a lot about various things on the way of dropping me off at home, and before we knew it we fell for each other.....”

This was a bar filled with memories of him; she often came to this bar with him.

“He originally planned on leaving his wife. However he said his wife wouldn’t ever allow it. So he had planned on hiring a killer to kill his wife. And for that to happen he worked part-time as a driver and saved up on money. Since I loved him too, I decided on helping him. We both were steadily saving up on money.”

And yet the other day her lover was suddenly killed. By someone.

He recalled the past. The cause for Jiro starting his career as an avenger was the death of his lover. Jiro’s lover’s life was stolen by a killer. Though he was called a killer he was an abnormal man who took pleasure in killing people and killed at random. Naturally, his lover had done nothing wrong.

He could not turn down a request from the ones bearing anger and resentment towards the person responsible for sending their lovers and spouses to death. It only seemed like he was looking at his past self, and he desired to hold a hand out to them. If he pays attention, he had been accepting mostly nothing but the same requests.

“Here,” Kaori took out a thick envelope from her bag and handed it to Jiro. “This is the money we have been saving. Please, will you take revenge on the culprit responsible for killing Tadafumi-san with this money?”

His shift had ended and Saitou left the store. It was a ten minute walk from

his part-time job at the convenience store to his apartment. Saitou walked swiftly under the gloomy evening sky.

Arriving at his apartment he searched for his keys to open the automatic locked door. After he fished through his bag, he noticed his cell phone was flashing. He had one voicemail. When he started the recording he heard a familiar voice.

[Ah, hello? Saitou-kun? It's Enokida. To tell you the truth, you'll be getting into some trouble soon. Well, to put it simply, a killer is going to your apartment. To kill you. So, good luck.]

“.....Eh?”

– What did he say just now?

He replayed the message once more. Saitou carefully listened to the words. A killer is going. That was what Enokida is saying. Someone is coming to kill Saitou at his apartment. He did not understand. *What is up with this so suddenly? What does he mean by that?* Falling into a moment of panic, he made a call with shaking fingers.

Enokida picked up after the third call. [Hello~?]

“Enokida-san! What do you mean by that voicemail?”

Enokida whispers ‘ahh’ as though he has just recalled something.

[An employee from Murder Inc. asked for your location.]

– Murder Inc.

His muscles shook just by hearing that name.

“It can't be; you told them!?”

[Well, it is my business. Sorry~]

“Wha-” He could not believe it. Saitou's eyes opened wide. “Why did you do that?!”

[That's why I'm apologizing.]

“This isn't something that'll be fine with an apology! Actually, is that attitude of someone apologizing!?”

[I said I'm sorry. I'll compensate for it.] Enokida laughs. [So try your best to survive.]

The other dropped the call. Saitou stood stock still in front of his apartment. Unable to grasp the current situation he was dumbfounded.

He looked up at the building. He could see an unknown man on the balcony to his room. He was watching the street while smoking a cigarette. And then suddenly he made eye contact with the man. "Ah," the man spoke. There was no doubt about it. It was a killer from Murder Inc sent to kill him.

At long last what he had feared had come to pass. Hell had come to greet him.

Saitou ran without any thought to it. He felt the man's voice yelling "wait" from behind him. *I got to run*, he thought. At this rate he would be killed by the company. He ran with all his might to get away from the apartment the killer was at.

Someone help me. Save me. Saitou opened his contact list on his phone with those clinging thoughts in his mind.

Yamato made a displeased face when Lin intruded his work place at the host club Adams. He seemed to be rather annoyed being summoned while in the middle of work.

When he brought up the matter he wanted done, Yamamoto made an even more sourful expression. "Haa? Why do I have to do that?"

"Isn't it fine? You're off right now."

"Does it look like I'm off?" *I'm in the middle of work*, Yamato bore his teeth. Ignoring that, Lin repeated his request. "Anyway, find the owner of this vehicle and take their money."

He pointed to the photo Kumiko took, but Yamato was not taking it. "I said no."

"You just have to follow them, take their wallet, and give back 100,000 yen. That's an easy win for you, right?"

"And what if there isn't 100,000 yen in their wallet?"

“Then just continue pick pocketing them until you get 100,000.”

“Are you a dumb ass?” He shrugged his shoulders. “I won’t do that.”

“.....About that club, Eve.” Lin grinned. “The hourly pay is good, and the seniors there are nice, so I guess I should just start working there.”

If Lin made a mistake there it would put Yamato’s position in danger as he was the one who recommended Lin. At Lin’s provocation Yamato’s expression changed. Just as he thought he would turn pale, the next moment he had a resentful expression. It seemed his threat worked.

“Dammit. Alright! I just have to do it, right?”

He plucked the photo out of Lin’s hand and left the club angrily. Although he was pushing the task onto others, at least one of the troublesome jobs was taken care of.

When he got back to the office it was already dawn. Banba had returned at some point and was sleeping on his bed.

After he took off his makeup and laid down on the sofa he heard the ringtone of a cell phone. The intro of Iza Yuke Wakataka Gundan began to play. It was not Lin’s. It was Banba’s cell phone. Even though it continued to ring Banba did not respond; he was fast asleep. The tune reached to its chorus.

“.....Who is calling at this hour?”

He picked up the cell phone left on top of the desk and peeked at the screen. It displayed the characters ‘Saitou.’ He was also a common acquaintance of his, so it would be no problem if he picked it up instead. Lin pressed the accept call button. “What is it?”

[Help me! Please help me! Save me!]

His screaming voice pierced into his eardrums. Lin grimaced and moved the receiver away from his ear. “.....Calm down a bit.”

[Huh? Lin-san? Where’s Banba-san?]

“Banba is,” he glanced over to the bed. He did not feel he will wake up anytime soon. “He’s completely passed out and snoring.”

[Then, Lin-san is fine!]

“What the hell do you mean by Lin-san? Wait.”

[Anyway, save me! Please save me! Please!]

“.....That’s why I said calm down.”

When he asked what was going on Saitou explained his situation although a bit distracted. [I’m being chased by a killer! Please save me! Enokida-san sold me out! So an assassin came after me! To kill me! Please save me!]

“Haa?”

[Anyway, please get here quickly! Please!]

“Where are you right now?”

[I’m heading towards Hakata Station!] His breath was ragged. He must have been running all this time. He consented reluctantly. “Alright. Wait for me at the station.”

Lin dashed out of the office.

Saitou’s legs were nearing their limit. No matter how much he participated in the once a week baseball exercises, it had been a long time since he ran this hard. Maybe not since his high school club activities. Although he felt he could not lift up his feet or that they could tangle, Saitou just kept running. When he looked back he could see the silhouette of the killer in the distance. He picked up speed in his haste. If his feet stop, he would die. He would be killed. He told himself this to urge himself on.

Finally he could see JR Hakata Station.

He entered from the Hakata entrance on the west side of the station and passes by the elevators in the center. The first train had yet to arrive, so there were hardly any people. Saitou concealed himself behind one of the pillars along the concourse.

While trying to regulate his ragged breathing, he looked around the area. Lin was not here. He probably had not arrived yet. *Should I wait for him? Or should I go look for him?* As he was wondering what to do to himself he saw the killer at the entrance of the station. He noticed Saitou and ran after him.

This is bad; he found me. His heart jumped in his chest.

What do I do? He looked around the area and searched for an escape. Saitou immediately took out his IC card and put it in the center ticket gate for the JR line. The killer was quickly catching up to him from behind, but the ticket gates closed faster than the killer could capture him. The killer tried to forcefully push through, but the staff stopped him.

Now's my chance. Saitou ran further. He dashed up the stairs to the nearest platform, track 3.

On the third track platform a normal train was stopped bound for Kokura. It was a red and ash gray colored car. Saitou got on that and hide himself in one of the seats.

He was caught in the moment. *Please close the doors quickly. Please take off right away. Before the man comes.* He looked at his watch in prayer. There was three minutes left until the train departed.

It was then. He received a call.

[I'm at the station.] It was Lin. [Where are you?]

"I-I'm in the train. A regular train heading to Kokura."

Looking outside the window Saitou was startled. The killer was standing on a platform on the other side. He looked around him, searching for Saitou. At last he noticed him in this train car. The killer unhesitatingly jumped down onto the track. He attempted to climb onto the third platform.

Still connected to the call, Lin rushed to the platform. A train bound for Kokura was stopped at the third stand. Lin slipped through just as the train doors were closing.

"I got on the train." He looked for Saitou while walking through the passageways. "Where are you?"

[I-in the third car.] His voice was shaking.

Lin was in the second car. He immediately headed to the adjacent car.

When he opened the door, Saitou was waiting for him; he was making a pathetic expression. "Lin-san!"

"Where's the killer?"

“Over there.” Saitou pointed with his finger. He saw a man on the other side of the passenger door. He was walking in their direction.

“We’re moving back.”

He moved with Saitou to the second car and then the first. There were no other passengers here.

[Next stop is Yoshizuka. Yoshizuka.]

He heard the voice of the announcer. They would arrive to the next train station soon.

When we arrive, you get off the train and run. I’ll buy time. He was going to say that but stopped himself. *What if that killer is just a decoy? It would be a repeat from Shindo then.* He must not leave Saitou alone.

He pushed Saitou between the seats for four people. “Hide here.”

“Eh.”

“Just do it; don’t move.”

Lin stood next to the passenger door and waited for the man to appear.

The door opened. At the same time Lin leapt forward and punched the man’s face. The man stumbled from the unexpected impact and collided with the opposite door. He collapsed in the canopy.

The man was holding a gun. It was entirely in an ocher color, and the tip had a noise suppressor on it. It was a gun he had seen before. Furthermore it was a large caliber weapon with a form suited for military use. It probably used 45 ACP bullets. Since it had strong power, one shot could be fatal.

The man stood back up and stepped into the first car. He kicked his arm. The man dropped the gun. He reached out to pick it up from the ground, but he would not give him the chance to do so. Lin made to slash at him with his specialty knife. The man gave up on the gun and stood up to face him bare handed. He seemed to have the confidence to handle himself in a one-on-one fight.

“You,” The man asked with a miffed expression. “What is your connection with Saitou?”

Lin answered his question curtly. “Nothing much. I’m just a hired killer.”

He persisted with his fierce attacks whilst conversing.

“And you, what is your deal with him?” He brandished his knife to create a diversion.

The man bent over, dodging the attack. “I’m just here to eliminate a traitor.”

“M-hm,” *so that’s the case, huh*, Lin grinned. “You should just leave a weak guy like this alone. That company Murder Inc is surprisingly cowardly.”

For an instant the man’s eyes widened. He seemed shocked that he knew who he was. “It’s to prevent guys like you knowing of them if he talks about us.”

They left Yoshizuka, and now the train should proceed to Hakozaki, Chihaya, and then Kashii Station. At some point they had passed Hakozaki Station and were already heading to Chihaya Station.

Saitou poked his head out from the seats and watched nervously.

“So you are there, huh.” The man spotted Saitou and smiled. He took something out of the pocket in his cargo pants. It was a bluish black, elliptical shape object.

– A hand grenade

You’re kidding, when that thought passed through his mind the man removed the pin. He threw it towards the seat Saitou was at. Lin immediately leaped up to try and grab it. He stretched his body as much as he could like a runner when trying to catch the baseball. However, he did not manage to make it. The grenade passed over Lin’s left hand and fell at the seat Saitou was at.

“Uwaaa”

Saitou stumbled out into the passageway as he yelled out a cry.

The man had been waiting for it.

The grenade did not explode. It was a fake. It was to distract Lin and bring Saitou out into the open. The man picked up the gun while Lin was distracted with the grenade. He pointed the gun at Saitou.

“Look out!”

Lin yelled. He moved at the same time. Reflectively and unconsciously. He jumped into the passageway to shield Saitou. He collided with him; he fell over onto the ground, tripping over him.

The gunshot goes off at the same moment. The bullet grazes Lin's left thigh. A sharp pain shoots through him. The wound is hot as though it is burning. Even though it is just a graze it has this much force behind it.

The path of the bullet veered and missed Saitou.

" – Don't move."

However, the man once again points the gun in their direction.

"Drop your weapons."

The man ordered.

Lin stopped moving and thought. *What should I do? Should I do as he says? Or should I oppose him?* Even if he waited for an opening and fired a shot with his knife-pistol there were too many risks. Lin's weapon was short-ranged, and its blasting force was far weaker than his. *Would I even be able to obtain victory with three shots of 22LR bullets? And what if I miss a vital spot? If he fires back it will be the end.*

The situation put him at a disadvantage from what he could see. He had no choice but to obey. Lin placed his weapon onto the floor.

His past failing passed through his mind. *Will I fail again? Just like the time with Shindou. I'm not suited for this in the first place. Protecting other people's lives. Besides a killer is different for a bodyguard. And yet, to protect a person's life. It would have been better not to ask for me to do this.*

'Dontcha make some excuses now.'

Banba's voice suddenly came to his mind.

Shut up, he thinks to himself. Ahh, that's right. It's my error. For that time when I left Shindou alone too. And even though there is no way he would cause an explosion on a train I was distracted by that grenade and turned away from my opponent. I'm such a bonehead for a pro.

'That's why I always tell you, right? You gotta have a grasp on your

surroundings.’ He recalled Banba’s words. *That’s right. He has always been telling me that. To take into consideration the conditions left around me. How many outs are there. Where are the runners. Compare the speed of the runner and the strength of my arm to make an out at the adequate place. It’s the same for this job.*

Lin quickly glanced around him to try and grasp his conditions and put his mind to work.

The ground is within a train. We are just about to leave Chihaya Station.

I’m unarmed. We are standing roughly between the exits on both sides. There’s a means to retreat. However, my leg is injured. It’s a minor wound, but it would be difficult trying to run with Saitou right now.

And the enemy? He is standing directly in the middle of the passageway between seats and is holding a gun. The gun is pointed at my head. If I make the slightest move he could pull the trigger at any moment. In this narrow car I cannot dodge from the range of the blast.

Think. Of a way to cut through. Somehow I have to distract this man’s attention. Could I delay the time it would take for him to pull the trigger even if it’s just for a moment?

The train was moving. He saw the familiar landscape outside the window from Chihaya to Kashii. *Now that I think about it, he considers. I used to live nearby here some time ago. When I used to be a killer for the Kakyuu Group, I commuted on this train. That’s right. This is my home (stronghold).*

– Find it. A way to cut through.

“.....Tell me.” Lin asks him. “Are you from Fukuoka?”

The man shook his head while still holding the gun towards him. “No. I’m on a trip here.”

An outsider then? That’s perfect. “Then you probably don’t know.”

The train was entering Kashii Station.

“I used to live near here awhile ago. So I know.”

“.....Of what?” The man frowns deeply.

“This train, at this place, will always,” he grinned and took a strong step forward. “Jerk here.”

The whole train jerked harshly. It was enough to take him by surprise.

“Wha -”

The man stumbled back, and his gun accidentally pointed upward. His aim had strayed. *Now’s my chance.* Lin moved. He managed a kick to his right arm. After the gun was knocked to the ground he delivered a fist into his solar plexus. The man groaned a little and fell where he was.

He picked up his knife-pistol and made shots to the man’s chest. There were three gunshots in the train. At the same moment he heard the train conductor speak. [Kashii. We are at Kashii. The exit is on the left side. Please watch the opening doors and your footing.]

Both doors opened.

The killer was unmoving. Lin grabbed Saitou’s arm and pulled him up. “Come on, we’re getting off.”

Bottom of Seventh Inning

Saruwatari met up with Nitta at the usual udon shop. He told him the details of the Kakyuu’s request from the day before while slurping down his firm udon noodles, sitting across from him. It had been two weeks as of today, July 14th, since he teamed up with Nitta, and finally he managed to pull in a huge job.

When he mentioned the name Niwaka Samurai, Nitta was a little bit shocked. “Niwaka Samurai.....I’ve heard the rumors regarding him.”

“Is he that famous of a guy?”

“More or less. He is a freelance killer with various mysteries. I only know that he wears a Niwaka mask and uses a Japanese sword though. He seemed to be more of an urban legend, so for him to really be real.....”

Nitta took out his smartphone. He operated the screen with his left thumb, and he held the chopsticks in his right hand to eat his udon. He did so skillfully,

but his manners were poor.

“Whatcha doin’?”

“I’m searching if there is any information on the Niwaka Samurai.”

Nitta was browsing through an underground site called Undergroundjobs.com. It was a site that apparently gathered various information of their industry and not just listing job offers. The posts were anonymous, so naturally it was not credible.

Nitta searched the term ‘Niwaka Samurai’ throughout the whole site. After a moment Nitta whispered. “Ah, here it is.”

“What is?”

“The Niwaka Samurai.”

“Ah? You’re kiddin’.”

“It really is there. Look, here.” He showed him the screen.

On the bulletin for job listings there was a post under the handle name ‘Niwaka Samurai.’

‘Awaiting to accept murder requests for one hundred thousand yen, exact. Niwaka Samurai.’

At the end of the paragraph the e-mail address was listed.

“That’s a fake, ain’t it?”

“That’s a fake.”

What is this ‘awaiting to accept’ crap? That is so fishy. That has to be a fake. He considered it pointless to fight with someone like that.

However at the same time Saruwatari felt a familiar bad feeling at agreeing to that opinion with Nitta without objection. *Actually, something similar to this happened in the past*, he recalled. It was that match when he was in high school.

It was the summer nominations for Koshien in his third year of high school. Saruwatari had stood on the mound on the bottom of the ninth inning. 112 pitches have been thrown with one point lost. It was 2 to 1, with the team in

the lead. They had two outs with a runner on first base. If they managed one more out they would be certain to attend at Koshien. The batter was the fourth man up with no hits up until that point. 18 to 44 meters ahead the catcher Nitta made a sign to him. His request was for a slider. Saruwatari shook his head to both sides. *No way, it's got to be a straight pitch.* He threw a straight pitch at the corner of his mitt. The batter did not swing. The striking zone was plenty. The umpire raised his hand.

His second pitch was a slider. The ball flew outward in the same orbit as the first, and the batter missed.

The third was a tough inside pitch. The batter pulled back to dodge.

Now then, what should he do? Saruwatari thought over what mixed pitch to do. *It's got to be an in high straight ball for a sucker pitch.*

Nitta made a sign for a straight and placed his mitt at the height of his head. An in high straight pitch. Surprisingly enough they had an agreement on something; Nitta grinned. He nodded to the sign.

It was probable that to Nitta prepared for this pitch to get them out next time with a charged, outside pitch. But Saruwatari did not think of that. He wanted to get him out with that pitch. He would get them to have three outs from missing. That was what he planned for.

He raised his left arm, stepped forward and swung down his arm. The ball flew in a straight line towards Nitta's mitt. The batter took a step forward and swung the bat. *Alright, he missed.* So he thought.

However, the next moment he heard the metallic chime. It was a loud, crisp sound that could wake someone up. The bat managed to reach the high ball and hit. Shouts of cheers rose up from the rooters. Saruwatari stood there dumbfounded while watching the white ball disappear into the stands.

It was a game-ending home run. It was 2 to 3 and their lose. Saruwatari was unable to move and stood right where he was.

‘That was incredible. Who knew that pitch would end up being a home run.’ Nitta walked up to the mound while taking off his mask. ‘Really, I can only praise the guy who hit that.’

What are you saying so carefree? Because of us we lost. Saruwatari got mad and after throwing down his glove onto the ground he punched Nitta in the face with his right hand a few times. His teammates ran over to him crying and stopped Saruwatari. Still mad, he punched his teammates who tried to stop him. 'Drop it.' He heard the yell from his coach. He punched their coach too. That was Saruwatari's last day playing baseball.

Saruwatari shook his head as he slurped down his udon, *I remembered something unpleasant.* Ever since that happened whenever he saw eye-to-eye with Nitta he felt a bad premonition coming up. He could not help but feel something was going to go into a bad direction.

" – No." Saruwatari backtracked. "I'll meet them and see if they really are the real deal."

"You will? Well, I don't really mind." I think it's pointless though, Nitta chimed in but agreed. "Then let's contact them."

He sent an e-mail to the person claiming they were the Niwaka Samurai. 'I have a man I want dead. I'll pay any amount for it.' He wrote to them. He looked at his wrist watch. Right now it was just before seven o'clock.

"I'll be going." Saruwatari stood up and left a thousand yen bill onto the table. "I'll be back soon."

"Be careful." Nitta waved to him as he left.

The designated place was at an underground parking garage in Canal City. Saruwatari took an express sonic train from Kokura to Hakata.

Arriving at Canal City he took the elevator to the basement floor. Two men had been waiting for Saruwatari at a corner of the dark parking garage. They were in a position where they could hide from the security cameras.

One was the rumored Niwaka Samurai and the other called himself his manager. The man calling himself the Niwaka Samurai definitely looked the part for samurai. Or more specifically he was pleasantly dressed as though to attend a costume party.

".....You're the Niwaka Samurai?"

Saruwatari frowned and asked the man. He considered he was being made fun of.

“Indeed I am.” The long topknot haired man spoke. “I am called the Niwaka Samurai.”

They’re fakes. Saruwatari confirmed. *It was just as Nitta said, this ended being a complete waste of time.*

Saruwatari went to punch the man in the face as a test. If he was the real Niwaka Samurai he should be able to easily dodge this attack. However, Saruwatari’s fist directly hit the Niwaka mask. “Bu-heh.” The man let out a pathetic cry and fell onto his rear on the ground.

The mask slipped off, and he could get a clear glimpse at the man’s face. It was a young, stupid looking man. “Wh-what were you doing?! You insolent man!” He was flustered.

Saruwatari took out his hidden ninja blade.

“You see, I’m here to kill the Niwaka Samurai.” He drew his sword and pressed the tip to the man’s throat. “Are you really the Niwaka Samurai?”

“No. No I’m not!”

He answered immediately.

“I’m not the Niwaka Samurai!” The man shook his head left and right. It was with such a velocity that it looked like his head would snap off. He completely changed his manner of speaking. “I’m a fake!”

“No doubt ‘bout that.”

At present this means they were merely small fry killers using the Niwaka Samurai’s name to earn their fame. He had no business with them regardless of who they were unless they were the real Niwaka Samurai. “Well I guess I should kill you too then.”

He lifted up his blade.

The imposter shrieked. It was then.

“ – Wa-wait.” The other man spoke up. “Let us go.”

“And why should I?” Saruwatari inclined his head to the side.

“There’s no reason to kill us.”

“I don’t need a reason to.”

The man was poor at giving up. He desperately continued to try and persuade Saruwatari from swinging down the knife. “We’ll be of more help to you alive. We know of the Niwaka Samurai’s whereabouts.Or more specifically, we know the mediator of the Niwaka Samurai.”

At the man’s words Saruwatari stopped his movements. He lowered his blade and glanced over to the man. “.....You telling me the truth?”

“Yeah,” the man nodded deeply. He did not appear to be bluffing on the fly. “You’re looking for the Niwaka Samurai, right? We’ll call out the real one through his mediator. So in exchange let us off the hook.”

He could not believe all of his words. However, he had come all this way to Fukuoka so he could not go back empty handed.

“Alright.” Saruwatari pressed the tip of his blade to the imposter Niwaka Samurai’s throat and ordered. “Bring the Niwaka Samurai here. And no runnin’, alright? I’ll keep this guy as a hostage in the meantime.”

When he pulled back the curtains at the Genchan food stall, “you finally showed your face ‘round here.” The moment he saw Abe’s face the head of the store Genzo scowled at him. He knew full well he put him in a foul mood.

“No matter how much you plead, I ain’t givin’ you work.”

Genzo spat out at him coldly. His attitude was curt, but Abe had no intention of backing down.

“That’s not it.” He shook his head. “I came here as a client.”

“A client?”

“I want to have the Niwaka Samurai do a job for me.”

Genzo made a shocked face for a moment.

“You’re the mediator for the Niwaka Samurai, right? So please.” *Otherwise, our lives are in danger.*

Abe continued on with the negotiation as ordered by that killer.

“I already have the payment prepared.” He placed a large attache case onto the table. He had received it from the killer. “There’s 10,000,000 in there.”

“No matter how much you have I ain’t -”

“Wait. Don’t misunderstand.” He cut off his words and stated. “This is the advance pay.”

Genzo’s eyes widened at Abe’s proclamation.

“The payment for completing the job is 90,000,000. All together it is 100,000,000.”

Naturally even for Genzo his complexion changed at the price. “.....What are the details for the job?”

“Tell the Niwaka Samurai to come to the underground parking garage in Canal City right away. His client is waiting for him there. He just has to meet up with him and listen to what he has to say. He can decide if he wants to take it or not there. It’s not a bad deal, right?”

After a few moments of silence from Genzo, he only replied with, “I’ll consider it.”

In all honesty he wondered if he could not go to Genzo’s shop and just run off with the 10,000,000 yen. If he did Yamamoto would be finished off and he would have a large sum of money. However, Abe’s conscience would not allow that. Even though he was a killer he could not bear the poor aftertaste of letting someone die because of him. It was instances like these which make him too naive.

And so to save the hostage Yamamoto, Abe headed back to the killer. The killer was waiting for him at the back seat of the van. He asked Abe while keeping his blade pointed towards Yamamoto. “Did it go well?”

“Yeah. He didn’t seem too put off by it. Because the pay is so massive he was a bit suspicious of it though.”

“He’ll come though, right?”

He could not say for certain. However, if he answered honestly the other

would probably not accept that. *Of course*, Abe nods.

“It’s a promise then. I’ll let you guys off the hook.”

The killer accepted Abe’s request rather easily. He sheathed his sword and stepped out of the van. Finally released from his imprisoned state Yamamoto stroked his chest.

Abe got into the driver’s seat and starts the engine. He wanted to leave from this place as fast as he could. The killer turned towards them and threatened, “Prepare yourselves for me comin’ to kill you two when the Niwaka Samurai doesn’t come.” He proclaimed that as though no matter where they went he would chase them down. Abe stepped onto the acceleration pedal while praying in his heart that the Niwaka Samurai accepted the offer.

The silhouette of the killer gradually grew smaller in his rearview mirror. *If we leave here we should be fine, right?* Abe was relieved.

As he paid the fare and left the parking garage Yamamoto sighed deeply. “..... Ahh, I was scared. Look here. My hands are still shaking.”

“Did you quit from the drugs?”

“Even so, that was sure a shock. Who knew it’d end up like that.”

“We met with a punishment for making money so easily.”

Even though he could have been killed Yamamoto was unexpectedly nonchalant about it. He started typing away on his smartphone while smoking his cigarette half stuffed with illegal drugs as usual.

After a few moments, “.....Ah!” Yamamoto suddenly raised his voice.

“What is it?”

“Look at this!”

He pushed his smartphone at Abe’s face.

“What is it?”

He parked the car to the side of the road and peeked at the screen. It was a page from Undergroundjobs.

There was a post relating to the Niwaka Samurai among them.

“There’s a bounty on the Niwaka Samurai’s head! And it’s 100,000,000!”

Yamamoto said excitingly.

It certainly said on the page, ‘We will pay the one who captures the Niwaka Samurai 100,000,000 yen. It does not matter if he is alive or dead.’ Then perhaps the killer from earlier had seen this post and was looking for the Niwaka Samurai.

“.....This isn’t a ruse right?”

It is far too suspicious to pay 100,000,000 yen. Besides, you cannot believe the information on the internet. We’re a good example of that.

However, it was not awful to consider. That killer put down high advanced pay to meet with the Niwaka Samurai. He would not have done that unless he could break the difference even if he lost 10,000,000. It means that there was someone out there who was placing an even higher price on the Niwaka Samurai’s head. They could receive good pay if they could bring the Niwaka Samurai in alive.

“Let’s catch the Niwaka Samurai!” Yamamoto was entirely invested in it. “That guy from earlier is going to meet up with the Niwaka Samurai, right? We can snatch the Niwaka Samurai when there’s an opening as they fight!”

This man always thought up crazy ideas. He worried if it would really go that easily, but their first fraud had went smoothly. There was a one in a million chance. Gaining 100,000,000 yen and going back to that place again. He evaluated the natural skill of the two and risks. It was a feasible price for them to bet their life on. Besides, Abe had his pride. He could not let this slip by them. He wanted to give Genzo the shock of his life. That was the position he took, but in truth his eyes were on that large sum of 100,000,000 yen.

Translation Notes:

1. Iza Yuke Wakataka Gundan (いざゆけ若鷹軍団) is the theme for the Fukuoka Softbank Hawks professional baseball team.
2. I failed to mention this initially when Yamamoto wrote up that post, but he was using Samurai speech. It does not translate over well other than in

tone, but he used some really old wording that no one uses anymore. He even uses more samurai talk when he initially greets Saruwatari and drops it when Saruwatari tells him he wants to kill the Niwaka Samurai.

Eighth Inning

Top of Eighth Inning

Saitou was shaking in fear of an assassin from Murder Inc coming for him and did not want to go home, so it was six in the morning by the time he left Saitou at Shigematsu's place. It was seven in the morning when he returned to the office, treated the wound on his leg and laid down onto the bed. He then slept like a log, and before he knew it night had already fallen. His days and nights have been completely reversed.

Hearing the sound of Banba coming back, Lin woke up. He must have been drinking somewhere as Banba was in high spirits.

"Lin-Lin. I'm hooome~."

He was acting like a stranger compared to how he usually was. *He's completely hammered.* He let out a sigh.

"Righty, here's a present!" Banba says and hands it over to Lin. "A redback spider cell phone strap!"

"Don't want it." He snapped back.

"I saw Enokida-kun earlier and got this from 'im. It's a new model. Here, you can have it."

"No, I said I don't want it." He quipped at him again. "It's disgusting."

"Why you say that?" Banba pouted. "It's cuuute."

"How?"

".....Well whatever. I'll put it on." Banba said and took out his cell phone. However his drunken hands were unreliable and were unable to put the pin through the small hole in the cord.

Just by watching him he got irritated. He seized his cell phone out of his drunk hands. "Argh, fine. I'll do it. You just go and sleep."

Banba wavers as he heads over to the bed and collapses onto it.

My god, he said to himself and shrugged his shoulders before putting the strap on. At that moment Banba's cell phone rang. The usual tune began to play. 'Old man' was displayed on the screen.

Lin unwillingly answered the call in Banba's place. "Ahh, hello?"

[.....Hm? It's you, Lin? Where's Banba?]

"He's drunk as a skunk and dead asleep."

That's a problem, Genzo whispered.

"Something wrong?"

[Well, you see. I have something for the Niwaka Samurai.]

He glanced towards Banba. He did not appear to be able to talk about work at the moment.

"Are you in a rush?"

When he asked Genzo consented to it.

[There is a client who says he wants to talk with the Niwaka Samurai right away. The downpayment is 10,000,000, and the reward is 90,000,000. They say it's fine for him to decide if he'll accept the job or not after he listens to them.Dontcha reckon' it's a good deal?"]

"Definitely."

It was too good to be true. His instincts were telling him there had to be something behind it.

[What should I do? I thought of consultin' with the person himself and decide, but.....] However, Banba is in this state.

He suddenly thought of an idea. *Could this possibly be a trap set by the Kakyuu Group? What if a killer hired by Li has finally sniffed him out?* He must not let Banba go. On the contrary, he had the most ideal chance to beat that assassin first.

"I'll go in his place."

[Ha?]

“It’s fine if I pretend to be the Niwaka Samurai, right?”

[Well, that’s true there but.....]

“Leave it to me.”

Cutting the call, Lin began to change clothes. It had been awhile since he last worn a suit. He often wore one for when he went to the office when he worked for the Kakyuu Group.

“.....Mmm.” Banba shuffled seemingly waking up from the loud noises he was making. He asked in a sleepy voice while rubbing his eyes. “.....Huh? Lin-chan, where you goin’?”

“I’m going to work in your place.”

He fastened his necktie and tied his hair back.

“Come on, lend me your mask and katana.”

He handed out a hand towards Banba. *Hurry up*. After he urged him on, Banba stood up unsteadily.

“.....Seriously. Getting all drunk like an idiot even at your age.”

Banba mumbled while holding out the Niwaka mask in his left hand and the Japanese sword in his right hand, “Soorryy.”

It was immediately after that when he called Lin. Men he was familiar with came into Genzo’s store. First Jiro came in, and as he was eating his ramen Yamato appeared next. Both of their expressions were sullen.

“What’s up with ya now?” Genzo questions. “You two are makin’ gloomy faces.”

“.....The truth is,” Yamato answered him with a truly troubled expression. “I met up with a dead end for work.”

“That’s a coincidence. Same here.” Jiro chimed in.

“By work do ya mean pickpocketin’? Or host work?”

“It’s neither of those.” Yamato snorted. “Lin is helping out a client that came to Banba’s office. And I guess some guys are going around calling themselves the Niwaka Samurai and are doing advance payment fraud.”

“.....That’s been popular recently, ain’t it? Fraud where guys pretend to be famous killers.” Genzo whispered with a frown.

“Seems that client had 100,000 yen taken by the fake Niwaka Samurai. So he told me to find them and snatch 100,000 yen from them.”

Why do I have to do this? Yamato pouted resentfully.

“I asked Enokida to find out their identity from the number plate of the car..... But I guess it’s a stolen car purchased from an underground dealer. I’m at the end of my rope.”

“Same for me.” Jiro piped into the conversation. “I got another revenge request from a lover of someone, and I had Enokida-chan look into it. In the security camera footage it showed the culprits put the body into a vehicle, but since it was a stolen car he was unable to figure out who owns it. We just know the culprits are a group of two who drive a white van.”

“Huh? You too, Jiro-san?” Yamato instantly raised his face from his slumped position. “The guys I’m tracking down are also a group of two. In a white van.”

Yamato and Jiro look at each other.

They took out a photo at the same time and placed it on the counter. The same white van and two men were in them.

“Could this be.....”

“.....The same culprits?”

“Let me see.” Genzo peeked over at the two photos and muttered. “Ah.”

Jiro and Yamato turned towards Genzo. They remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

“These guys.....” Genzo stared closely at the men in the photos. He knew these too. “.....There ain’t no doubt about it. They were killers of mine.”

Leaving the office, Lin hurried to Canal City. He headed over to where the client was waiting once he put on the mask and strapped the Japanese sword to his waist. The rendezvous point was at the 24-7 commercial parking garage. In a corner on the north side area a man was waiting for him. He was sitting, reclined against the wall.

“.....Are you the Niwaka Samurai?” The man took notice of Lin’s presence. He asked him as he got to his feet. “You the real thing? You’re frickin’ tiny compared to what I was expecting.”

He could not make out his face. On top of the hood covering his head he was also wearing a black cloth around his mouth. He was suspicious just by looking at him. He did not appear to be just a client. Lin braced himself. “Yeah, I am.”

“I have the 90,000,000.” At the man’s feet was a huge duralumin case. “I want you to kill someone with this money.”

“Who do you want killed?”

“Me.”

What? Before he could question this the man moved. He hurled himself at Lin with his blade over his head. He blocked the hit with the scabbard of the Japanese sword.

“That’s quite a request, isn’t it?” The client had suddenly came at him, trying to slash him. *So it was a trap after all*, Lin glared at the man. “.....You’re a killer, aren’t you?”

“You pulled that out quick.” The man said and pointed with his chin at the Japanese sword. He then placed his right foot on the case with the money in it. “If you beat me you can have the 90,000,000 in here.”

The man used the case as a stool and jumped high. He swung his sword at Lin’s head, swooping down from above.

Lin blocked the attack again with his sword. A dull sound was made when the blade and the scabbard clashed against each other. He pulled out the Japanese sword and made a swing to cut him in the torso. The man dodged it on nimble feet. It was like he was moving as though with pivoted steps. He looked composed.

Lin distanced himself from the other and observed him. *Calm down. Be calm.* He told himself. *What is the enemy’s weapon?* He squinted in the dim lighting. His blade was around 50 centimeters in length. The pattern was that of a Japanese sword, but it had a short, linear form. The guard was square shaped.

– It can't be. A ninja sword?

The moment he realized that the man took out some kind of weapon from his jacket. And he threw it with a strange form, bending his body over to the right.

His response was slow. He could not dodge it.

"O-w."

A sharp pain shot through him. When he looked he saw a black shape piercing his side. The object had four pointed ends jutting out – it was a shuriken.

A Japanese sword and shuriken. An underthrow. He recalled what Enokida told him. *Could this guy be the Submarine Ninja? The one who was hunting down killers?*

I see. So the killer hunter from Kitakyushu now has his eyes on the Niwaka Samurai and came all this way to Fukuoka for him? So he wasn't an assassin under the Kakyuu Group?

"I've been thinking a lot of how much I want to fight you." The man said. His eyes were creepily narrowed, gazing at him from between the space of the hood and cloth.

Lin clicked his tongue. *This guy is enjoying himself.*

"I won't forgive ya if you die so easily."

The man assaulted him with attacks in succession.

Lin was not used to handling a Japanese sword. The weapon was too heavy for him to make a counterattack. He could not swing it well.

".....Damn, this is really hard to use!"

He thrust the sword, throwing it at the enemy. While the other dodges it he took out his favorite knife-pistol from his pocket. He was not a samurai anymore; it could not be helped that he had to return to being a normal killer.

The Japanese sword Lin threw pierced into one of the parked cars behind the man.

He had confidence in his agility. But the other was even more fast. Lin was on the defensive. The shuriken stuck in his side was weakening his movements.

Even if he pulled it out there would be no difference in strength. Acutely sensing the overwhelming presence in front of him, a cold sweat formed on Lin's brow.

The man kept taking flying objects out of his pockets like a machine gun. He rolled over and moved around behind a vehicle. He used the vehicle as a shield and waited for the attacks to stop.

At last silence falls. He placed a finger on the trigger of his weapon to prepare for a counterattack and searched for his target.

However, the man is gone.

Where is he? Where is he hiding? He looked around the area. He felt no one's presence. It was then. Suddenly his legs were grabbed. The man's hands reached out from underneath the vehicle. *I let my guard down. He was hiding there?*

He was dragged down between the vehicle and the ground. He was unable to catch himself.

Bottom of Eighth Inning

It was a let-down.

What 'killer of killers'. Put before the Niwaka Samurai, Saruwatari was just disappointed. "You weren't that much of a big shot."

He had been anticipating just how strong the so called 'Hakata's strongest killer' really was. And certainly compared to the other killers he had faced in Tokyo and Kokura to a degree he was better. This man was the first killer to have held up to more than five minutes fighting Saruwatari. And yet it did not change the fact he did not match his expectations.

The Japanese sword that was thrown at him earlier was still stuck in the vehicle. Saruwatari grabbed a hold of his head and put the blade near his throat. "If you got any final words to say, I'll listen."

"Hurry up and kill me." The man replied. His opinion of him shifted slightly. All the killers he had met up until now sputtered nothing but plies before they died. 'Save me, 'stop,' 'I don't want to die.' Everyone shook as they said them

with teary eyes.

But this man was different. Even though both of his palms were pierced by kunai and his legs were slashed he stood to face him. Even in an overwhelming situation he did not lose his will to keep fighting. He could at least respect his courage. He will let him off easy for his manliness and give him a quick death. Saruwatari put force to his hand.

The next moment after he tried to slice open the man's throat – a strong light suddenly shone on them. They were the lights of a car. A familiar van was speeding towards Saruwatari.

The van came to a screeching stop in front of Saruwatari. There was the sharp sound of breaks that could pierce someone's eardrums as the tires slid against the ground. Those two were in the vehicle: the fake Niwaka Samurai and his manager. The other poked his head out of the driver's side and pointed a gun at him. Saruwatari immediately hid himself behind a car.

The van's slide door opened and the other man jumped out of it. He was attempting to pick up the Niwaka Samurai, unmoving and crouched over.

– Could they be trying to snatch him from me? My prey?

He held the Niwaka Samurai under his right arm and snatched up the case with the money in it with his left hand and then got into the van. The door closed shut loudly.

"Shit."

They got me, he clicked his tongue.

The car took off. They changed from going in reverse and then sped off. He chased after them, but naturally he could not keep up to the speed of a van.

"Those bastards.....!" Left behind, Saruwatari kicked the car next to him.

They succeeded in grabbing the Niwaka Samurai and even stole the money. Yet he was scared that they accomplished too much.

They shook off the man that was on them and continued to drive. *For the meantime I want to keep ourselves hidden.* Abe had his eye on an old building over the Naka River. It was an apartment building set in ruin with ivy

overgrowing there. There was nonsensical graffiti written on one side of its white walls. Since the management was poor there were many trespassers, and criminals and homeless people made themselves home there. Abe and Yamato also had used a room there as a place of refuge on occasion.

They parked the car in front of the apartment building and carried the Niwaka Samurai up the stairs. As usual they entered the room on the second floor. They bound the wounded Niwaka Samurai's limbs and put him in a chair.

"Whoaa, please look at this mountain of bills."

Yamamoto opened the duralumin case and his eyes shone at the sight. He then started to stuff the bills into his wallet and his pockets.

Abe reported to the person who made the post that they have captured the Niwaka Samurai. He received a reply from them shortly after. [We have received intel from witnesses on the Niwaka Samurai, so we want you to use this as reference. His height is between 170 and 180 centimeters. His hair is black and swept back.]

That's strange. Abe tilted his head. The man they caught was not even 170 centimeters, and he had long brown hair.

"Wait, are you.....a fake?"

He took off his Niwaka mask. He was able to clearly see his face. He was still a young man. He looked to be around twenty years old. He had neat and androgynous facial features.

"You're slow on the uptake." The man laughed.

That bastard Genzo. Abe tutted. *So we just caught a fake?*

"Where's the real Niwaka Samurai?"

"Who knows." The man smiled provocatively to Abe's question. He did not appear to be willing to answer honestly.

"Let's just make him talk with force."

Yamamoto smirked and punched the man in the stomach. He punched him in the face and stomach as he was strapped to the chair. The man choked and coughed out spit mixed with blood.

Even after he was hit to the point for bruises to appear on his face the man still kept his mouth shut. Not quite afraid, he gave them a light smile. “..... What’s wrong? Is that it?”

Yamamoto became exhausted and gave up using violent attacks on him. “This guy just won’t give.”

“He could undergone training for it.” He must be used to the pain. “Just hitting him won’t do it; there’s no point in this without a proper torturer.”

“A torturer. That seems like a good idea, right? How about I look one up.”

Yamamoto took out his smartphone. He opened that website again. He made a search for a ‘torturer’ to find anyone there.

“Oh, there’s this guy.”

On the bulletin postings for job applications there was one post that called themselves a torturer. ‘Do you want to get information out of someone?! Do you want them to suffer?! Do you want them to hurt?! I’ll answer to any of your needs. A cheap torturer will be sent. Quotes are free via e-mail. Your first time will be 50% off.’

“We should hire a pro for this.”

Surprisingly enough Abe also was in agreement with Yamamoto for once. They were poor at hurting someone for information. He did not want to soil his hands by going through with cruel methods like tearing out fingernails or peeling off skin. It would be better for them to leave it up to someone that has already done that.

They decided to contact that torturer right away. They sent an e-mail saying, ‘we want a man tortured and have him give us information.’

There was an immediate reply. [For a quote I need information on the intended candidate.] They listed off the man’s features and replied to them. [His age is around twenty years old. He is less than 170 centimeters and slim. He has long hair. And probably a hit-man. No matter how much blows he takes he doesn’t fess up.] They had wrote that and attached a photo of the man.

The estimated price for a torture fee was 30,000 yen. Paying a large amount

of money from when someone did not give them information was a fair system in this case, so they hired him. They sent over the address of their current location.

It was less than an hour later when the torturer arrived.

The torturer was a black man of a large build of nearly two meters tall. He held a large carrying case and something like a toolbox in both of his hands. He had brought in large luggage as though he came back from a trip overseas.

“Ahh, hello.” He greeted them in fluent Japanese without making eye contact. “Thank you for the job offer.”

He looked down at the man in the chair and asked them in an informal tone. “And so? What should I make this man say?”

“The Niwaka Samurai. Everything he knows about him.”

“The Niwaka Samurai, huh. Okay.”

After he gave them a short answer, the torturer first released him from his restraints and began to take off his clothes. He took off his jacket, shirt, and necktie, leaving his upper body bare. He then opened his tool box. Inside there were various torturing tools.

Just when he thought the torture would begin he took out bandages.

“What are you doing?” Yamamoto asked him.

“Stopping the bleeding. He’s injured, right? It’d be a problem if he were to die in the middle of the torture session.”

The torturer began to wrap the bandages around the man’s open wounds. Both of his hands and stomach. And then his legs. “Gugh,” the man groaned from the pressure put on his injuries.

After he stopped the bleeding the torturer picked up pliers. “Sorry, but could you guys give some space?” He turned around to them and gave them a bitter smile. “When other guys are around I can’t focus on the job at hand.”

He had planned to leave even without him telling him to do so. He did not enjoy watching people get hurt.

“We’ll be in the next room. Call us when you’re done.” Abe turned on his heel and left the room with Yamamoto following behind him.

“Okay,” the torturer replied back.

“Ugh, gwaagh.” Behind them they heard the man’s screams, bearing against the pain. *Are his fingernails being pulled off?* Abe wiped the unpleasant image from his mind and quickened his pace.

There was a cafe open until dawn on the first floor of the Gate’s Building. Saruwatari awaited Nitta’s arrival while drinking his iced tea among the mix of salarymen and women working at the nightclub around him.

After a while, “sorry to have kept you waiting~,” Nitta waved to him and came over.

He finally was able to meet up with him an hour and a half later after he had called Nitta to ‘come to Fukuoka right now’ when the Niwaka Samurai was snatched from him.

“You’re late.”

“Sorry about that. But I really rushed over here.” Nitta then asked him. “So, what happened? Why’d you call me so abruptly?”

“.....Someone got in my way.”

He grew irritated just recalling it. Saruwatari clicked his tongue.

“The two guys came and stole the Niwaka Samurai and the money from me.”

He explained the whole story to Nitta. After hearing it, Nitta grinned. “That’s rare of you. For you to make a blunder like that.”

He was offended, but he did not snap back at him. It was true that he slipped up. He let his guard down. He was too focused on the Niwaka Samurai and did not pay attention to his surroundings. And so he was left open in that moment. He felt like he was focused too much on the batter and a base was stolen while he was unaware.

However, he was not completely had.

“I put that tracking device I got from you on their van.”

When he got into their vehicle the first time he placed the tracking device between the backseats.

“That’s great.” The edges of Nitta’s mouth curled up into a smile.

“Hurry up and find these blokes’ location.”

“Alright, alright. Wait a moment.”

Nitta took out a tablet device from the inside of his bag and began to look up the current location the transmitter was sending out.

“.....Oh, here they are.”

He found them right away. He turned the tablet to Saruwatari. The screen showed a map of Nakasu. On it there was a red point blinking.

“Looks like they’re at a building alongside the Naka River in Nakasu. I’d say it’s about a ten minute walk from here.”

They were at a distance not that far away. Saruwatari stood up. “I’m going to go kill them.”

“Ah, wait. I’ll go too.”

Nitta also stood from his seat.

Ninth Inning

Top of the Ninth Inning

“Ugh, gwaagh.”

Lin could not help the cry that came from his throat with fingers pressing roughly on his bandages. After confirming the other two men have left, he said in a low voice. “.....That hurts, you damn sadist.”

Martinez, pliers in hand, only shrugged. “Hey now. You’re calling your savior a sexual sadist?”

“You’re enjoying the hell out of this, aren’t you?”

“Unbelievable. I’ve never once considered enjoying my work.”

“You’re grinning like an idiot.”

Martinez grasped Lin’s arms with a bitter smile. “Can you stand?”

“More or less.”

In truth it was difficult for him to do so. Even though they were not fatal wounds, all of his limbs were injured. But he was not in a situation to whine about it. Lin took Martinez’s hand and stood up from the chair. He ground his teeth and bore with the pain.

“Even so, I was surprised. Who knew I would receive a picture of you from my client.” Martinez pointed at Lin’s wounds. “You have injuries all over your body. Who did that to you?”

“A ninja.”

“A ninja?”

“He threw shuriken at me.”

Martinez bursted into laughter. He did not seem to believe him. “Shuriken, you say? Hey, you’re kidding me, right?”

Since it was more bothersome to try and explain the events, Lin changed the topic. “What are we going to do from here?”

“Leave that to me.”

Martinez opened the case as he told him this. Inside there was a dead body of a young man. He had a small build and long brown hair. The same as Lin. He did not have any clothes on him.

“Make sure to thank Saeki-sensei. He prepared this for you in a hurry. And I had to order the wig from Jiro. We don’t have time, so I’ll attach it with glue.”

He took out a knife from his tool box. He made the same cuts on the body as where Lin’s was.

“Lin, take off your pants. We’ll have him wear it.”

As instructed Lin removed his slacks and was left in just his underwear.

Martinez worked on the body to make it look like it was tortured. He gouged out its eyes, chipped off its ears and nose, cut the corners of its mouth, and damaged the whole face so it would be hard to tell its features.

Lin squinted in disgust as he watched. He was amazed such a nice face could be turned to something so revolting.

Martinez turned around and gave him a bitter smile. “Don’t just stand there and watch. Yell a bit. Isn’t it suspicious?”

“...Gwagh, it huuurts. Save meee.”

“That’s enough.” Martinez stopped what he was doing. “You have terrible acting skills.”

He finished the torture on the body and had Lin put on his change of clothes. Clots of blood clung to him on certain parts of his body. The switch was complete once he put the body into the chair Lin was sitting in earlier.

“Hurry, get in.” Martinez pointed with his chin to the empty case the corpse was brought in with.

“Again?” *Actually, I had to do this before too.* He recalls. He reluctantly gets into the case and curls into a ball.

“.....It’s tight.” He felt uncomfortable. “And it reeks of a corpse.”

“No complaining.”

Martinez closed the lid. Everything turned pitch black. "Stay quiet."

After a few moments he heard the footsteps of three people. He seemed to have called his clients over.

"Did you kill him?"

The man asked Martinez. It was the older one's voice.

"He was bleeding badly, so it was too late. Before he died, I got him to say some things though." Martinez continued. "Seems this guy was a friend of the Niwaka Samurai."

"You serious?"

"The Niwaka Samurai was busy with another job, so he went in his place. That is all I got from him though."

"No, that's enough."

The men seemed to be content with Martinez's work.

"Well then, until the next time you need me."

Lin's body was suddenly suspended. Martinez must have picked him up. Around the point they had gone down the stairs and were leaving the building Lin hit the suitcase from inside. It was a sign to let him know to let him out.

"Alright, alright."

Martinez replied and opened the case.

After he leapt out from inside and took in breaths of fresh air into his lungs, Lin asked him.

".....Hey, is that alright? Telling them that."

Martinez had told them the truth. Lin was a friend of the Niwaka Samurai. They may not know who he was, but they would still target the Niwaka Samurai once more.

"Are you worried for Banba?" Martinez replied back in question.

"It's not that, it's just....." Lin hesitantly said. "I'm just tired of causing others trouble because of my mistakes."

“You have nothing to feel responsibility for.” Martinez shrugged his shoulders. “Furthermore people of the underground like us have to live while our lives are being targeted regularly. That is our fate.”

Besides, he continued with a smile.

“He isn’t the kind of man to sit quietly and wait. He makes it seem like he isn’t thinking of anything, but he has taken precautions.”

What do you mean by that? Before he could ask him, Martinez turned around on his heel. His back was towards Lin and he began to walk away. “More than that, you should hurry up and get out of here. Can you walk?”

“Yeah.” He proceeded forward while dragging his feet. It was then.

Suddenly Martinez came to a halt. “ – Ah.”

“.....What is it?”

“Hey, is that vehicle theirs?” He pointed to the white van parked in front of the building.

“Probably.” Lin nodded. “I was put in that and brought here in it.”

Martinez approached the van. And then he started to set up something on the vehicle’s body.

“What is that?”

“It is the redback spider listening and tracking device, version two.”

“Version two?” *That mushroom went and made something weird again.*

“What’s different about it this time?”

“It’s now able to stick to walls. And there’s a cell phone strap of it too.”

He attached the spider shaped object with a red pattern on its back onto the vehicle.

Bottom of Ninth Inning

When they headed to the place the transmitter sent a signal from, they found the van in question in front of an old building. The two seemed to be placing something inside the vehicle at that moment.

Saruwatari walked over with large steps and called out to them.

“Hey, you two.”

The two turned around. Seeing Saruwatari’s face they were startled.

“Uwaah!”

They pathetically screamed and attempted to run away.

Saruwatari grabbed them by the back of their necks. “I ain’t letting you get away.”

You really did something unforgivable back there, he said and punched them both directly in their face. Behind Saruwatari Nitta was holding a gun and was closely watching them as to not let the men escape. The two men took notice of him and raised their hands up in surrender.

Now then, I can take back the Niwaka Samurai and the 90,000,000.

Saruwatari began to search through their car. The backseat was pulled down, leaving a wide and empty space inside. On the side was the silver case. It was his money that was stolen from him. After he took out the case from inside the vehicle he saw a blue vinyl sheet further inside. It was wrapped around something large.

Wait, could it be? He questioned and then took the object out of the car and pulled off the sheet. Inside was the body of a small figure man. He was wearing a suit and was covered in blood. From his appearance he must have been the Niwaka Samurai.

“.....You fuckers.” Veins popped on his head. He grabbed the man by the collar. “What the hell did you do?!”

I should have been the one to kill him. Saruwatari yelled in fury. The man, however, quickly explained.

“He was a fake! He was a friend of the Niwaka Samurai!”

“Aahh?”

“.....This man is definitely a fake.” Nitta mentioned. He was gazing closely at the corpse’s face. “There’s information from eyewitnesses. His height is

between 170 and 180 centimeters, and he has black hair. This body does not fit those traits.”

“The Niwaka Samurai was busy with another case, so he had a substitute. That’s what this guy said.” The other man made excuses. “We didn’t even know he was a fake. We were tricked by the Niwaka Samurai’s mediator.”

Nitta pressed the tip of the gun to the man’s forehead and asked him with a smile. “Could you tell me this mediator’s contact information?”

The two nodded at the same time. After Nitta handed them a pen and paper, they wrote down the man’s number and e-mail address with shaky hands.

“This contact information is real, correct?”

“O-of course.”

After they released them, the men hurriedly got into the car and sped off. He considered killing them but decided against it. Right now they were an important pipe connected to the Niwaka Samurai. They would do him no favors dead if something were to happen. Furthermore they were still unaware of the transmitting device. He could track them down no matter where they went and could kill them at any time. So he let them go.

Saruwatari and Nitta were the ones to remain behind. As well as the corpse.

“.....Alright, and now what?”

“We’ll use this to bring out the real one.” Nitta glanced over to the body. “Something fairly more enticing will have him take the bait.”

“.....How did they know where we were?”

Abe pondered as he drove the car. *How did that hit-man find us? Were we followed? No, that shouldn’t be possible.*

Actually – Abe recalled when they had first encountered the man. He told them, ‘Prepare yourselves for me comin’ to kill you two when the Niwaka Samurai doesn’t come.’ It was as though the man had said he could find them at any given time. He had believed it was a mere bluff though.

Then perhaps. Abe suddenly considered and parked the car to the side of the road. He moved to the backseat and started to search all over the seating.

“.....There it is.”

It was just as he thought. There was a black shape that looked like a transmitter stuck between the seats. He must have put it there when he had Yamamoto hostage in the back of the car. He threw it outside from the window.

“It hurtss.....My nose feels likes it’s going to come off.....” Yamamoto was pressing tissues to his nose in the passenger’s seat. His bloody nose had not stopped running since he got punched in the face by that man.

“It’s because we cowardly did fraud that we suffered the consequences.”

They had to learn from this experience and work honestly. Perhaps they could undertake jobs seriously again as killers. He was thinking ahead on what they should do. Then a call came on Abe’s cell phone. “Hello?”

[I have something to talk to you about.] It was from the mediator Genzo.
[Come to my shop.]

Abe dropped by Genzo’s shop. Because of what happened here previously he left Yamamoto in the car.

[I’ll give you guys one more chance.]

What Genzo had to say was beyond what he could have wished for.

“A chance.....Then you’ll give us another job again?”

When he asked Genzo nodded with a stern expression. “Yeah.”

“You will?”

“It’s been busy ‘round here. Enough that I need your help.”

He said disapprovingly and handed him over a note.

“Go to this place in an hour. The client will be waitin’ there. Ask for the details for the job directly from them.”

“Yeah, alright.”

Genzo warned him with a strict voice. “Dontcha slip up again.”

As if they would slip up again. This was a great chance that happened to pass by for them. They would accomplish this even if it costed them their lives. Abe

was worked up.

He passed underneath the curtains and leaves.

His footsteps were light. As he was walking along the Naga River to get back to the car,

“Oops.”

“Ow.”

He bumped into a man upfront.

It was a man with brown hair who wore gaudy clothes. For someone like him to be walking around this place meant he was likely a host working in Nakasu. He was probably heading back to work.

“Sorry.” The male host apologized civilly and walked away.

Extra Tenth Inning

Top of Extra Tenth Inning

It was four in the morning.

The area was still dark, and there was no pedestrian traffic in Nakasu. Genzo begins preparing to close the store earlier than usual even though he could earn more profits.

Today was July 15th. It was the day of the finale of the Hakata Gion Yamakasa, Oiyama. In the past Genzo would participate in the festival as a carrier, but at his age he could not anymore. He had gotten physically weaker and his lower back pain had worsened, so he had retired from participating in Yamakasa. But each year he would not miss watching it.

It was when he was going to move the food cart after closing the shop. His cell phone vibrated. He had an e-mail from an unknown address. There was no subject. 'Tell the Niwaka Samurai. We have his friend.' The text stated. And there were a few files attached in it.

"Wha-"

Genzo opened the files and was shocked. There were two image files. One showed a male body. It was a young man with long, brown hair. He was sitting, slumped against a wall covered in graffiti.

"Could this be...Lin?"

The second photo was a close up of the upper half of the body. The face had no trace of its original form. The eyes were gouged out, and the ears had been clipped off. Its entire body was bloody.

"No -" He covers his face with his left hand. *It can't be.* He had thought he was late in getting back to him, but for this to happen to him.

He called Banba immediately. However, he could not get in touch with him. That was to be expected. Today was the Oiyama.

Then he had to meet up with him and tell him directly. Genzo ran off, leaving

the food cart where it was. He passed Meiji street and crossed over the bridge to head to the starting point of Oiyama, Kushida Shrine.

When Genzo arrived, the street was already packed with people. The decorated floats lined the street, and the carriers of the floats were nearby preparing for their turn. The air was mixed with hot enthusiasm and anticipation. Paper lanterns and food stalls were spaced out on the side of the road, and observers of the event crowded the area with cameras in hand.

Genzo weaved his way through the wave of men wearing the *happi* jackets, searching for Banba. After pushing through he saw the *nagare* group Banba belonged to. Everyone was wearing their *happi* coats. He spotted Banba among them. He had his hair neatly smoothed back unlike his usual ruffled style and was wearing a headband. He was wearing a white *happi* that was left open in the front, a *shimekomi* of the same color with a straw rope in it to use when they carried the float, as well as deep blue *kyahan* and *jikatabi* for footwear. He was dressed fully prepared to participate in the festival as usual and was doing stretches while chatting with others in his group.

“Banba!”

Banba turned around at his loud yell. “Huh? Old man?”

“Enough of that. Get over here!”

He grabbed him by his arm and dragged him to a place with less people.

Banba was baffled. “What’s got you so bent out of shape?”

“L-Lin is -” He told him as he regulates his breathing. “Somethin’ terrible happened to Lin.”

“.....To Lin-chan?”

Genzo explained the details and showed him the e-mail.

“What’s this.....”

Naturally Banba was also at a loss of words seeing the violent imagery in the photo.

“Looks like his eyes was crushed and his ears cut off. I don’t know what scum even did this.....”

He was only left with the regrets. He should not have let Lin go.

After reading the text in the e-mail Banba turned on his heel. “.....It’s too late.”

He had been severely hurt and major blood loss. Lin could not be saved. If he let Banba go there it would be another repeat of Lin. That was what he felt. He did not want the same regret for him again. “Lin is already dead. You ain’t gonna do nothing by goin’ to save him.”

Banba was not that dense. He should already know that without Genzo telling him so. He was going even though he knew that fully. That was the kind of man he is.

“.....It don’t matter whether he’s alive or dead.”

Banba placed a hand on Genzo’s shoulder.

“It’d be lonely for him to be left there on his own.” Banba smiled. “I’m goin’ to get him.”

Bottom of Extra Tenth Inning

There was a large crowd of people in the neighborhood of Kushida Shrine. The festival was about to begin, so the men wearing *happi* were crammed together in the street. Observers were lined up on the side of the road. Saruwatari walked by pushing through the masses while dragging a large traveling suitcase.

The time was just before five am. The area was still dim and dark.

The place they told the Niwaka Samurai to go to was at a construction site near the shrine. He pulled aside the tape, ignoring the no trespassing warning.

The building was covered with black thin sheets, seemingly at the very start of construction with nothing but the iron bars as the framework set up. With no ceiling he could see the night sky. The only objects in the area were the materials, and the outlook was fine and spacious.

The Niwaka Samurai had been waiting for him already. He was there standing in the center of the inorganic space. Saruwatari was taken aback by the sight of him. He was wearing a white *happi* and *shimekomi*. He had a headband on his head, and a rope was dangling from his waist. He was dressed the same as the

men he saw earlier. This man must have planned to participate in the festival as well then. Even so he found he was not taking this seriously for him to come see him, who had his friend as a hostage, like this.

Just as the rumors said, half of the Niwaka Samurai's face was covered with a red mask. His height was between 170 and 180 centimeters, and his hair was black. He matched the characteristics. Saruwatari was certain he was without a doubt the real one. He knew from experience. The man had a different atmosphere around him compared to all the other killers he had faced up until this point, regardless how ridiculous he looked right now. Even unarmed he could feel the difference.

"Finally the real one appears, huh." He smiled underneath his kerchief. Naturally after sending him the photo of the atrocious body of his friend the Niwaka Samurai could not ignore it. "You sure irritated the hell outta me."

"Where's the man from the photo?" The Niwaka Samurai questioned him. He said it with a low, cold voice. He did not appear to be in a good mood.

"Dead. He's in here."

He kicked the traveling suitcase he brought over to him. The wheels on it spin and then stopped right in front of the Niwaka Samurai. Inside was the standin body and the Japanese sword he had on him.

The Niwaka Samurai opened the case and checked its contents. He viewed his friend, now deformed. And then Saruwatari saw the edges of his mouth curl into a faint smile.

He frowned deeply. "What're you smilin' for?"

"Nothing much."

The Niwaka Samurai fully smiled as he said this. *What a creepy dude.*

"Well, whatever." Saruwatari took out his weapon he had hidden underneath his hooded jacket. He then pointed to the Japanese sword with his chin. "Go and pick that up already."

The Niwaka Samurai's response was cold in contrast to Saruwatari's provocation for a fight. "The Yamakasa is 'bout to start. I ain't got time to play

with you.”

“Then give up on the festival.” He had no intention on letting him get away. Saruwatari stood in the way, blocking the exit. “If you’re so persistent on it, then go after you kill me.”

‘Ten seconds!’

They heard the voice of the announcer counting down the beginning of the festival from the direction of the shrine.

The Niwaka Samurai seemed to have gotten in the spirit to fight him. He picked up the Japanese sword out from the case and faced Saruwatari.

‘Five seconds!’

The countdown proceeded.

It was about time. Saruwatari could not suppress himself from grinning. His eyes were alight and deeply gaze at the other. He anticipated it excitingly, and his breathing picked up.

He made a smooth exhale and then stopped.

‘Yaaaah!’

The men’s shouts resounded around them. The festival had begun. The two men moved with that as their signal. They pulled out their swords and stepped forward. Saruwatari was slightly faster.

There was a sharp metallic sound. The two crossed blades; they glinted in the darkness.

‘Oissaa! Oissaa!’

They could hear the yells of encouragement to carry the floats incessantly. There was the raise of cheering and taiko drums playing.

Unyielding to the fast tempo, Saruwatari swung his sword in quick succession. He did not give him the chance for a counter attack. As the Niwaka Samurai stepped back he blocked the attack made to mow him down.

He is definitely the real thing. He thinks. This man is strong. Stronger than anyone I’ve faced up until now.

Saruwatari pushed back with great force, but he did not let down his guard. He dodged Saruwatari's fierce attack with impossible moves and awaited for a chance to deliver a counter attack. All while judging Saruwatari's strength and exhausting him. As expected, he was Fukuoka's number one 'killer' of killers. His dynamic vision in seeing through his blade work was good and his reflexes in dodging his attacks were good; he was a formidable opponent.

'Oissaa! Oissaa!'

The shouts got louder. The floats had left the compound of the shrine and were spreading out into the city. The men passed by on a nearby street as they raised their voices.

Saruwatari pulled back his ninja sword from swinging, gripped it underhand and made a sharp thrust. The Niwaka Samurai used the momentum to his advantage to make a cut as he bent over to dodge the attack to his upper body.

Saruwatari made distance once while preparing for the attack with the scabbard he held in his left hand. *This is getting fun.* Saruwatari licked his lips as he gazed at the strong opponent in front of him.

It is then.

"That's far enough!"

"Don't move!"

They suddenly heard the voices of multiple men in the area. The two of them stopped and turned their gazes to the direction of the voices. Men in black surround Saruwatari and the Niwaka Samurai. From the look of it, there were roughly more than ten people. All of them were holding guns and had them pointed at the Niwaka Samurai.

And from the group Li appeared.

".....So that's how it is." Saruwatari whispers. He recalls the leg brace equipped with the GPS. It seems he had been followed by the Kakyuu Group.

"Discard your weapons and put up both your hands."

The Niwaka Samurai obediently followed Li's orders. He was subdued by the men and got captured, unresisting. Out front there were three high quality,

black vehicles parked. Li's subordinates covered the Niwaka Samurai's head with a sack and put him into one of them.

"Hold on a sec!"

Saruwatari raised his voice to stop them. But the men did not. They pushed the Niwaka Samurai into the backseat and took off.

Saruwatari was dumbfounded as he watched the black car grow smaller. This was the second time his prey had been snatched from him. He shook in fury. *Shit.* He clicked his tongue. *Everyone is getting in my way.*

".....What's the meaning of this?" He bit back at Li, suppressing his anger. "You guys are the one who asked for his assassination, right? Why'd you interfere?"

"The circumstances have changed. We received the order from the president to bring him in alive."

Don't fuck with me. He kicked a nearby metal bar.

"You worked splendidly this time." Saruwatari snorted at Li's grateful statement. *I haven't done anything since you snatched him up at the perfect moment.*

".....What're you gonna do with him?"

"When the president returns he will be executed before us. The president has said he wants to kill him with his own hand."

"When will he be back?"

"Who knows." Li tilted his head. "He has been with a lover in a hotel since last night, so I am unsure."

After he said that Li turned on his heel. He got into the car with a few other men and left. The ones remaining were Saruwatari and two of Li's subordinates.

"Here is the promised amount."

The men carried out a duralumin case from the trunk of the other car. They placed it at Saruwatari's feet.

"Check it."

They urged him to do so, but Saruwatari did not move.

“.....You won’t look?”

“Yeah.” He did not have much interest in money. He did not care if all of it was fake or if everything was just scraps of paper.

More than that,

“Where are you bringing the Niwaka Samurai to?”

He questioned the men. He could not just withdraw after coming all this way. They both shook their head.

“As if we’d just tell you.”

“Yeah, our lips are sealed.”

Of course they’d say that. He thought. They should not readily talk about the organization’s secrets.

“Your lips are sealed, you say?” Saruwatari grinned and asked back.

“That’s right.”

“How about we test that?”

His right hand moved and swung the ninja sword quickly. He stuck the tip of the blade to the man’s lips. He then moved it to the right and sliced the right corner of the man’s mouth. Blood poured out.

The other man was taken aback. He cried out and ran. Saruwatari beat him to it and blocked the exit.

He stalked up to the man and asked the same question.

“Your lips are sealed, you say?”

The man’s complexion changed.

“I got it. I’ll tell. I’ll tell you!”

He seemed to get it. He lost his footing and tumbled back on the cold concrete.

“I-in Susaki City, we have a building we use. We have a soundproof floor there, and we often use it for torture and executions. The Niwaka Samurai will

likely be taken there.”

After he heard the address of the building from the man Saruwatari sliced open his throat.

It was past five in the morning with the area starting to become brighter. Nitta was in a hotel connected to the Canal City. He was in a suite room on the eleventh floor. He was waiting for someone, laying down on the king size bed in the spacious, high-class room. When he turned on the television the broadcast of the Hakata Gion Yamakasa was on. He was not particularly interested, but he had nothing else to do, so he decided to watch it.

She should be here soon. It was when he considered this. He heard a knock. It was a sound of a window being tapped on and not a door. When Nitta looked outside he saw a woman in a bathrobe waving at him. Her long hair was caught by the wind and was waving about restlessly.

Nitta’s eyes widened. This was the eleventh floor. She had asked him to wait for him in this room so he did, but he did not expect for the person he was waiting on to appear from there. The woman had tied curtains together and used it in the place of rope to descend down from the highest floor. She did not appear to be wearing anything else underneath her bathrobe.

“This is quite the shocking entrance. In many ways.”

Nitta opened the window while bitterly smiling and invited her in.

“Since you called me to the hotel so suddenly, I was in a bit of anticipation. Yet this is just some help with your work.”

“My apologies.” The woman moved down into the room and smiled at him.

Her name was Sayuri. She was a killer he is acquainted with. She was quite a few years older than Nitta, and a rather beautiful woman.

“How did it go? Assassinating the president of the Kakyuu Group.”

He asked her while closing the window. She had just finished her job from the floor at the very top.

“It went great. In just another thirty minutes the subordinates waiting in front of the room will find his body.” After answering him with a composed

expression she asks Nitta. “And how about the articles in question?”

“I have them prepared.”

He told her and handed over the uniform for the hotel employees. They were for her escape.

After taking them in hand, Sayuri unhesitatingly took off her bathrobe in front of Nitta.

“Wa-wait. Please don’t change here.” He quickly averted his gaze.

“But I don’t have time.”

Sayuri was calm. She efficiently put on the uniform.

“Say, Sayuri-san.” Nitta addressed her while still facing away. “Would you mind taking one more job? I was asked for another murder.”

It was from the day before. Nitta had received information that there was a live witness of the Niwaka Samurai and took off to confirm it. The witness was a woman and she was in prison. She brought up the terms of exchange with Nitta in their meeting. In exchange for telling him the characteristics of the Niwaka Samurai she wanted a certain man dead. He was on a time crunch.

“It’s a simple job and easy money.”

“No.” That was her immediate reply. “I’m tired for today. Nitta-kun, since you do nothing but use others, how about killing someone yourself once in a while?”

“I’m not good at killing people. Besides, I’m more suited for my current position.”

He gave directions to others and they followed through. Nitta preferred his current position where he could do as he liked with people he was no match for in strength. It was fun for him and he had less danger in losing his life.

“You’re skilled and if you’d work together with me it would be fun. Won’t you use this opportunity to pair up with me?”

“I like being on my own.”

“You won’t ever get married like that.”

“And I don’t want to pair up with some creepy guy.”

“Ahhh, I got turned down.” Nitta says jokingly.

“Thank you for today. You saved me.”

After she finished changing Sayuri, now as feigning as an employee, went to leave.

“Sayuri-san.” Nitta stopped her and asked. He had a slight interest in it. “Who was it? The one who gave you the insane request to assassinate the head of the Kakyuu Group?”

Sayuri smiled and only answered with, “an insane man,” before closing the room’s door.

Now alone again, Nitta lied down face up on the bed. As he was watching the television he pondered over who would request such a task. Abruptly, Saruwatari’s face came to his mind. He had gone to go kill the Niwaka Samurai and had ceased contacting him. *I wonder if he died.* He considered. Even if he was alive he hated killing small fry. He would probably not accept it.

He called over to the next killer that comes to his mind.

“Hello, Gondo-san? It is Nitta.”

After conversing for a bit, he brought up the main topic at hand. “By the way, I have a job for you.....”

Gondo agreed readily. [If it’s a request from you, then I’ll gladly accept.]

“I want you to kill a certain man.”

After he told him that he typed on his tablet with one hand and sent an e-mail.

“I sent you the photo of the man to your computer.”

Gondo seemed to have checked his e-mail right away. He sounded surprised to see the man in the attached photo. [This man is –]

“.....Do you know him?”

[Yes.] Gondo confided to him. [He is a shop attendant of a convenient store I go to often.]

Translation Notes:

1. [This is what Banba looks like](#) and a general rundown of the vocabulary used in this section.
2. [And here's an image from the Yamakasa event.](#)

Extra Eleventh Inning

Top of Eleventh Inning

Lin had slept in the sterile examination room at Saeki cosmetic clinic. When he awoke, the date had changed and it was dawn.

“.....Ahhh, I slept well.”

He got up from the bed and stretched with his arms raised up. He seemed to have recovered his strength as well. His body felt light thanks to the painkillers. He was able to move his limbs with ease.

“How are your injuries?”

Saeki poked his head into the room.

“They’re not bad. Thank you, doctor.” On top of preparing a body for him he also fixed him up. He was in debt to him.

“Nothing is more important than your well-being.” Saeki smiled at him. “Since you’ve just been snatched up, please don’t overdo it.”

At that moment Saeki’s cell phone rung.

“Hello?Ahh, Genzo-san. Eh? Banba-kun? He has not come here.” Saeki glanced over to him as he said this. “Lin-kun is here though.Eh? No, not as a corpse. He’s alive.”

What are they talking about? Lin tilted his head.

Saeki told him, “please wait a moment. I will put him on the line now,” and held out the cell phone to him.

He took it and pressed it to his ear. “What is it, old man?”

[Lin!] He yelled in such a loud voice he thought it would break his eardrums.
[You was alive!]

“.....Ha? Well, yeah, I am. Like normal.”

[I was sent a photo of you tortured, so I thought you was.....]

Yeah, he nodded. So he saw that body?

“That was Mar’s work.”

He explained everything in full. That he fought a ninja-like killer. That he was abducted by a pair of two men who suddenly appeared out of nowhere. And that fortunately Martinez arrived there, and he managed to escape. “ – And then I got treatment from the doctor and rested here.”

[You haven’t seen Banba?]

“No, I haven’t. What’s wrong?”

It was Genzo’s turn to explain what was going on.

According to him someone had used Lin’s fake body to bring out the Niwaka Samurai.

“Isn’t that an obvious trap?”

Was it the Kakyuu Group’s work? Or was it that submarine ninja?

[I tried to. I said you was already dead, so goin’ to save you was pointless. And yet he went anyway. To get your body.]

Why’d he do something so stupid? – He tutted and frowned deeply. *He should have just abandoned that. No, am I more of the idiot?* Lin bit into his lip. Because he made a mistake and got captured he got Banba into danger.

[And he hasn’t come back. I can’t get a hold of him.]

Could he have been killed? He had a bad premonition about this.

“.....Alright. Leave Banba to me. I’ll look for him.”

[Do you know where he’s at?]

“I have a lead.” He had the redback spider strap he put onto Banba’s cell phone. That may be able to tell him where Banba was at.

After he ended the call he took out his own cell phone and dialed up Enokida.

This is a familiar room. Banba thought.

It was a spacious, empty tenant with no objects in it. There were no windows, and the walls were soundproof. There were some reddish-black stains here and

there on the white floors and pillars. They were probably bloodstains. Banba had come here once last year. It was the torture room in the building the Kakyuu Group uses in Susaki City.

“.....I’m in a pinch.”

He talked to himself in a corner of a floor no one else was on.

His thoughts drifted to Yamakasa. *What time is it right now?* He had his cell phone concealed on him, but unable to move he could not check the time.

“I reckon’ if our float has already took off.....”

Unless he can get out of here immediately he would not make it in time for Oiyama. However, Banba was bound. His limbs were both tied by rope and was fastened to the pillar. Outside the room there was one armed man on watch. That man also had Banba’s Japanese sword. He sat cross-legged on the floor, just about to give up when it happened.

He heard a noise from outside the room; the cry of the man on watch. Next the door opened and another man appeared.

“You’re that guy from -”

It was the killer he fought at the construction site. The black kerchief was covering his mouth, concealing his face. He was holding a bloody ninja sword in his right hand. He approached Banba and swung his sword down.

The man had cut the ropes binding him. He was free. “.....Why you helpin’ me?”

“My goal is to kill you.” The man answered indifferently. “I can’t kill you if you’re dead.”

He tossed the Japanese sword to Banba.

“Here.”

He took it and put the scabbard in his *sarashi* wrapped around his waist. “Thank you.”

“Get outta here quick. Run.”

The man jerked his chin to get him moving.

The watchman was fallen in front of the door. He had been killed.

It was when he stepped over the body and out of the room. They bumped into the underlings of the Kakyuu Group who came from the stairway. "They're here already, huh." The man tutted.

The men noticed them and raised their voices.

"Wha-what are you doing, you bastards!"

"You let him go?!"

"Hey! The Niwaka Samurai escaped!"

The male ninja threw shuriken at the men who were trying to call for help. He threw one, two, and then three shuriken. However, they did not even graze the enemies. They all hit the ceiling or the walls.

".....You're bad at control, ain't ya?"

When Banba murmured that the man next to him bore his teeth at him. "Shut your trap!"

He threw again. They did not hit. In that interval of time their opponents made a counter attack. They took out their guns and fire.

The two ran up to the next floor as they dodged the bullets.

"Where was you aimin' at?!" Banba jeered at him as gunshots blasted off around them. "You clumsy ninja!"

"Shut it!" The other snapped back. "I just ain't good with my first pitches!"

"You can't get in the strikin' zone at all!"

"Watch me! I'll get better!"

"The game will be over by then!"

They rushed up the stairs, arguing all the while. The underlings followed behind.

When they reached the highest floor there was the exit to the roof. The enemies called for reinforcements, and their numbers increased. Everyone unmercifully fired their suppressor guns. They were assaulted in a rain of

bullets. The two quickly broke through onto the rooftop and locked the door. The thick door blocked the bullets.

It was now dawn. They looked around the area of the roof. The building was close to the goal for Yamakasa. On the street directly below them the first group was making their way to the end point and were mustering their strength to push through the last part of the course.

'Oissa! Oissa!'

There were the enthused shouts of the men, the cheering and applause of the spectators, and the splash of water. They could hear those sounds even from the top of the building. Banba awaited for the enemies' attacks to cease while he listening to the hustle and bustle of Yamakasa overcoming the sound of gunshots.

'Oissa! Oissa!'

The shouts only got bigger. At the same time they heard the footsteps of their opponents.

"They're coming."

The man pulled out his ninja sword and took up his stance. Banba also brandished his sword.

The door was kicked down and a crowd of men in black pushed through onto the rooftop.

After being attacked by a killer he was determined to quit his part-time job. He planned to go into hiding before the next hitman showed up. However the manager asked him, "we're short on people, so can you please come in for just today?" and so Saitou reluctantly went to work. Shigematsu would come to get him when it was time to go home.

The melody played, indicating a customer had come in. Saitou moved his gaze from the stock shelves to the automatic door. "Welcome."

One man entered the convenient store; no other customers were around. He was wearing a suit and sunglasses. Saitou smiled seeing the familiar man. "Ah, Gondo-san, welcome."

Although he usually wore a coat, today he was not. Perhaps he could not bear with the heat of mid-July.

Just as he was about to give him his thanks for the other day,

“My apologies.” Gondo approached Saitou and said, “this is just part of the job.”

“ – Eh?”

Gondo was holding a blade in his right hand. He swung it down towards Saitou.

“Uwaaah”

He immediately dodged it. His eyes popped out. *What is with this so suddenly?*

Gondo attacked again.

“Eh, wa-wait. Why are you sudden-”

The man who had saved his life from a burglary earlier was now trying to kill Saitou. He did not understand the meaning in it. *What is this? Could this man be a killer? Is he an assassin from Murder Inc?*

I have to escape. Saitou dashed out of the store and ran.

Someone, save me. He made calls at random. He first called Banba. However he did not pick up. He then called Lin. He also did not answer.

“Please save me. I’m being chased by a killer!”

He finally managed to get Jiro on the phone, but he ended up being turned down. [Sorry~. I have my hands full right now.]

The next person he called, Martinez, also said, [Sorry. I’m doing a job right now.]

Who should I look for help from next? Shigematsu? Yamato? Or maybe Saeki? He considered while he was running. It was then. He saw a golden mushroom hair crossing over the pedestrian walkway on the other side of the street.

It’s Enokida.

Just by spotting a familiar face and he was near tears. Saitou raised a hand and ran up to him. “Enokida-san!”

“Ah, if it isn’t Saitou-kun.” Enokida came to a stop. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

“Please save me! I’m being pursued by a killer!” He turned around after yelling that. He saw Gondo on the other side of the pedestrian walkway. “Gyaaa! He’s hereee!”

“...Geh, you’re kidding.”

Enokida scowled.

“Well, I’m busy, so I’ll leave you here.” Enokida turned his back to Saitou and ran off.

“Wa-wait! Don’t leave me here!”

He hastily chased after him. As expected of their first batter on their team, he was swift. To not be left behind Saitou ran after him frantically.

Enokida turned to face him as they ran. “Why are you following me?”

“Please don’t leave meeee! Besides, isn’t this your fault in the first placceeeee!”

“No, this doesn’t have anything to do with me!”

Saitou chased after the fleeing Enokida. And Gondo was chasing after Saitou.

As they ran on the street alongside the Canal in Nakasu,

“Ah! Genzo-san!”

He saw Genzo on the other side of the street. He was pulling the food cart.

“Gen-san, help out! Someone’s coming!” Enokida rushed over to Genzo.

“What’s got you two bent out of shape?”

Saitou caught up to them and explained the details, speaking fast. “I tried to call Banba and everyone for help, but I couldn’t get in touch.....”

“That ain’t a surprise. Banba and Lin are in quite the fix right now.”

“Nooo.” Saitou grieved in a pathetic voice.

“Is the killer that fella over yonder?”

Genzo pointed. Gondo was catching up to them.

Saitou nodded. “We got to quickly get out of -”

He was just a powerless convenience store worker who used to be called a killer. And then there was the mushroom haired young man unsuited for fighting and stayed indoors. And finally an old man who would likely strain his back if he moved even a little. Even if the three grouped together they would be no match against the man.

If only Banba or Lin were here.

Just as he thought that,

“Leave it to me.” Genzo pulled up the sleeves of his T-shirt. “I’ll be the pinch-hitter.”

Today was the once-in-a-week day off for the bar Jiro runs, Babylon. While it was a day off from the bar for him, as an avenger he worked everyday of the year.

“You got it, Misa-chan? We’re going to do this exactly as I told you. The targets are a group of two, so don’t let your guard down.”

“I said I know.”

Misaki answered in annoyance.

He took her hand and headed to the designated place. As they were walking they passed by men in their sodden *happi* jackets.

“No thinking about it, today is Oiyama, isn’t it? Thinking of Yamakasa reminds me of G.G.”

“What is G.G?” Misaki looked up at Jiro’s face and asked.

“He’s a hitman. This is just what I heard, but apparently he was a veteran hitman on this street a long time ago. He hurt his back in Yamakasa and retired thirteen years ago.”

“Was he strong?”

“Of course he was.”

“Is he or Zen-chan stronger?”

Zen-chan was his acquaintance, Zenji Banba.

“Hmmm.....” Jiro inclined his head thinking about it as he stroked his beard. “I wonder who.....That’s a tough question.” Even if you asked me ‘between Ichiro and Bass who is more amazing?’ I probably wouldn’t be able to give an answer.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I mean both players are amazing.” Jiro smiled. “The Niwaka Samurai and G.G are both skilled killers. They can’t be compared.”

“Uh-huh.” Misaki whispered.

They had their backs to Nakasu city, and they crossed Haruyoshi Bridge and headed towards Tenjin.

“There are two origins of the name G.G.”

To kill time, Jiro continued on with the idle talk.

“Apparently that man was born with an elderly looking face. So among his friends he was called ‘old man’ (jii-jii). And before he knew he was just ‘jii-jii.’ That is the first origin to his name.”

“And what’s the other?”

“It’s his initials.” Jiro winked. “Genzo Goda’s initials.”

“.....A-amazing.”

Saitou’s breath caught in his throat.

The battle was decided in just a moment. Genzo swiftly made a punch into Gondo’s chest. He moved so quickly it was unimaginable for a man in his sixties.

Just what is he? This man Genzo. Saitou stood stock still in shock and awe.

“That’s the legendary killer G.G for you.” The edges of Enokida’s mouth curve up. “It sure seems like you haven’t lost your touch.”

“You ain’t gettin’ nothin’ outta praisin’ me like that.”

Genzo wiped his cheeks, bashful.

“Eh? Genzo-san, you were a killer?”

He had not known.

“That’s a story from a long time ago.” After he answered him he turned his gaze to Gondo. “And, what should we do with this fella?”

Gondo was crouched over on his knees. He seems to have lost all the will to fight.

“How about killing him?” Enokida grinned.

“Wa-wait.”

Saitou quickly stopped them.

“The truth is.....This man saved me before.”

Saitou mentioned to them the day of the robbery.

He must not be a bad person. When he tried to kill Saitou earlier he also apologized. Then he must not want to do this. That was what he thought anyway.

“So how ‘bout you tell us then.” After he said that he asked Gondo. “Why are you targetin’ this man?”

Gondo answered honestly to his question. “I was asked to by someone I’m indebted to.”

George Gondo was originally an ordinary salaryman. He had a beautiful wife and a daughter. They lived in a single home and had a corgi. They were an ordinary family, rich in happiness.

And what destroyed that happiness happened just about a year ago. They found an irregularity in their seven year-old daughter’s heart. The name of the disease was restrictive cardiomyopathy. When they looked it up they found that an enormous amount of money was needed for treatment, and there were few families of patients that could collect the funds for it.

There had to be a job out there to save money for it. If he could gain a large amount of money then he did not care if he would break the laws to do it. For his daughter’s sake he would do any dirty work. And with that intent he arrived to Undergroundjobs.com.

On the site were several posts for crime: murder requests, bank robbery member applications, and drug dealings. He opened one post. The subject was 'please kill them,' and the body explained that they wanted a grandmother killed because the nurse found her an annoyance now that she had dementia. The reward was 500,000 yen. And that was Gondo's first job as a hitman.

It was two months after he quit his job as a salaryman and started working as a killer. His daughter's condition worsened. The doctor told him she only had a year left. They needed her in surgery soon or else she would not make it.

He had no time to gradually save money. He was struggling over what to do during winter of the previous year. Around that time a certain man approached Gondo. He was a young man named Naoya Nitta who called himself a killer consultant.

Gondo discussed work with him. After listening to him, Nitta heartlessly laid the truth out for him.

'For you, with no particular talent in assassination, to work as a normal hitman would only earn you a yearly earnings worth of between 15,000,000 to 20,000,000.'

Gondo was severely discouraged. He felt hopeless.

However, Nitta added on.

'So you have to save up 100,000,000 yen. Please leave it to me. I will answer to your needs.'

He was a suspicious man. He wore fancy clothing like his silver frame glasses, a nice jacket, and chino pants, but he was still young. *Could he trust some man like him?*

However he had no time to worry over it. Grasping at straws, Gondo signed a contract with the consultant.

Nitta gave his first instruction, 'when you do jobs from now on please wear these clothes,' and handed over a suit and a trench coat.

'There was a killer by the name G.G who was active in this city a long time ago. He was a skilled, *kona-otoshi* level killer rumored to be the strongest in

history, but he suddenly disappeared ten years ago. At present, there are various speculations flying about on whether he was killed or if he escaped somewhere. G.G's trademark was his beige trench coat, and he always wore it over his suit.'

You're kidding me. Gondo had whispered.

'Indeed. From today on you will assume to be G.G. You will pretend to be G.G making his reappearance and take on jobs. He is historically the strongest killer after all. Requests with a large sum will come in for you.'

As he would begin impersonating him he would unquestionably receive rather difficult jobs. Since he had no skill or talent and could only kill an unresisting elderly person, he did not think he could carry out jobs a *kona-otoshi* class could pull off. When he addressed his concerns frankly,

'It is alright. You do not have to do anything. Let's say for instance you, impersonating as G.G, take an assassination request for 10,000,000. You can pay another killer 5,000,000 to carry out that assassination. There are plenty of cheap, skilled killers in this city after all. And you can make a profit from the margins. It's the same as stock.'

And put to practice, Nitta's plan went swimmingly. He managed to save up 50,000,000 yen in half a year. What an incredible consultant. Gondo admired. And rumors about Gondo started to spread wide. And even his name George Gondo was fake, which Nitta instructed him to call himself.

'If you manage to get your name out there you'll be noticed by big organizations. Organizations that will pay you in such a high volume you could pay for your daughter's surgery and pay for a trip around the world in celebration for her recovery and still have change left over.'

And Gondo blindly believed Nitta's words.

And then the week before. 'A huge job came in. It is a multinational mafia called the Kakyuu Group. They requested for you. The advanced payment is 100,000,000 yen. You'll reach your objected amount with this.'

From the beginning Gondo had no intention in killing the Niwaka Samurai. His goal was just for the advanced payment. However, if he just took the advanced

payment and ran he would be hunted down by the Kakyuu Group. So these past few days Gondo has been moving around to various sites to gather information and put out bounties for the Niwaka Samurai on underground websites to deceive the Kakyuu Group.

Those were his past days until today. The Niwaka Samurai was caught by the Kakyuu Group. The lock on his ankle bracelet unlocked. And now that he reached his targeted amount he had no need to pretend to be G.G anymore. He departed from the trench coat.

At dawn Gondo talked with Nitta on the phone and gave him his thanks. 'Nitta-san, thank you so much. I was able to achieve the objected amount thanks to you.'

'I'm glad to hear it. Now you can save your daughter.'

Andthen Nitta changed the topic.

'By the way, I have a job for you.....'

Spurred on by his daughter's incurable disease to save money for the surgery, he became a killer. With the help of a certain man he impersonated G.G and managed to earn huge money. And the man who had looked after him requested for Saitou's assassination. The three had surrounded Gondo, having him explain the details of his story and listened.

"I see. So that's how it is." Genzo grumbles.

And for Saitou, who had his life targeted, he also could not blame Gondo.

But they could not leave the situation as is. Gondo took up the task of assassinating Saitou. He had to return the favor. But they could not have Saitou killed.

What should we do? As he was flustered over what to do,

"I have an idea." Enokida said cheerfully. "The truth is there are other killers searching for Saitou-kun too."

They must be assassins from Murder Inc.

"If you let him be, those other killers will get to Saitou-kun. So you can just tell your client that someone beat you to it."

Saitou turned pale at Enokida's proclamation.

"Wa-wait a second! Are you saying I should be killed?!"

Enokida gave him a toothy grin and patted Saitou's shoulder. "It's alright. Just leave the rest to me. It'll go fine."

Bottom of Extra Eleventh Inning

It was their last chance they received from Genzo. We have to succeed at any cost. Abe told himself. He may not have been so worked up since his time as a rookie. He headed to the park their client was waiting at with Yamamoto.

At the meetup place there was a tall man and a young girl. They must be a parent and his child. They did not look very similar though. The girl had a knapsack on her back. She looked like she would be in the lowest grade in elementary school. A client bringing a child with them was rare.

They parked in front of the park, and Abe was the first to get out. Yamamoto followed behind him soon after.

When the other man noticed them,

"I'm the client Tanaka."

He named himself with a smile and bowed his head.

It was when they were about to get into the main topic at hand. The girl pulled at Tanaka's clothes. "Hey, play with me~."

"Misaki, I can't. Papa has to talk about work with them. Please go over there."

"Ehhhh, no. Let's plaay."

The girl whined. And yet Tanaka stubbornly ignored her.

She then addressed Abe. "Hey, mister. Play with me."

"Eh?" Mister? He smiled bitterly.

"Play with me. Please~."

He did not hate children. He had considered having a girl someday before he

became a killer.

“Alright.” Abe made a smile.

The girl raised her hands in joy, “yaay~.”

“My apologies for the lack of discipline on her.” Tanaka said, ashamed.

Abe crouched down to the girl and met with her gaze. “What do you want to play?”

“Playing doctor.” The tone of the girl’s voice suddenly changed. It was a low pitched, mature, cold voice.

The girl’s small arms reached for Abe’s neck. “Misaki will be the doctor, and you can be the patient, mister.”

“.....Eh?”

He felt a prick in his neck.

– What was that just now?

Something pierced into his neck. He reached out and pulled it out. It was a syringe. There was a little bit of liquid left in it.

– Was this a drug?

He felt a strange feeling go through his body. He lost his strength and collapsed forward slowly. It was a strange sensation. He was distinctly awake, but his whole body was paralyzed. He could not move freely. He had no strength in any of his limbs.

“It’s alright. Relax. It’s just a muscle-relaxant drug.” Tanaka mentioned. His manner of speech was different than before. He took out a gun and pointed it at Yamamoto. “Don’t move.”

“Wha-what are you guys?” Yamamoto was flustered at the unexpected turn of events. “Just who the hell are you.....!”

“We’re avengers.”

Avengers? They weren’t a client then? He finally came to the realization. I see. We were set up. So when Genzo said he’d give us a chance that was a flat out lie?

“You guys killed Tadafumi Izuku, right? We’ll have you pay the price for him.”

Tanaka said. In the next moment.

“Ah.” The girl muttered. “He ran away.”

Just as the girl mentioned, Yamamoto ran away. He turned on his heel and dashed off without a spare glance. He left the fallen Abe behind.

Abe lamented as he watched him run off. *What a bastard.* He thought. *Even though I never tossed you aside throughout all this time, you would turn your back on me so easily? What a pathetic man.* He was stunned, feeling anger and regret rush through him. He wanted to jeer at him. But he could not speak.

“Hey, stop right there!” Tanaka yelled.

The girl next to him proposed something disturbed. “How about just shooting him already?”

“We can’t. What we will do if we accidentally kill him?” Tanaka ran off to chase after Yamamoto.

At that moment Yamamoto got into the car. He turned on the engine, stepped on the acceleration pedal and drove down the street. It was when he attempted to get away. There was a loud bang.

Another car collided into the side of Yamamoto’s van.

The vehicle that crashed into his was a black SUV. There were no sounds of breaks. It was like the driver unhesitantly was aiming for Yamamoto’s vehicle. The van veered and turned in a full rotation. A huge dent was made into the left side of the car. Yamamoto’s vehicle was blown away and collided into the guardrail on the other side of the road.

A man got out from the driver’s seat of the SUV. He was a large, black male. He was familiar with those non-Japanese facial features. He was that torturer.

He held up his fist up to the sky, “have you learned your lesson, you bastard.”

The avenger was surprised to see him too. “Oh my. Isn’t it Mar-chan. What are you doing?”

“Oh? It’s you, Jiro. And looks like Misaki too.” He spoke as though they were

acquainted with each other. “And what are you two doing around here?”

“Work. We’re doing work.” The okama male named Jiro answered. “We were tasked to kill the people who killed a person’s lover.”

“I’m also here for work. The revenge task you asked me to do. The hit and run case was their doing.”

“My, what a coincidence.”

“I meant to just hit them lightly.....but I may have overdone it.” The torturer gave a bitter smile while stroking his bald head.

“Mar-chan.” The girl walked up to the torturer. “You had nice timing.”

“Misaki.” The man she called Mar-chan gently hugged the girl with one hand. “You’re helping Jiro, huh? I wasn’t expecting that.”

“I injected a muscle-relaxant into that person.” The girl pointed to Abe proudly.

“Good work.” He patted the girl’s head in approval.

It was then.

“Huh?”

He heard the voice of another man.

“What’s everyone doing here?”

A young, host-like man appeared in the park.

When he looked closer he could see he was the man Abe ran into on the street alongside the Naka River.

“My goodness. Even Yamato is here.” Jiro said in surprise. It seemed this man was also an acquaintance of theirs. Yamamoto was rather fine from the collision. He managed to open the car door and fall out onto the ground.

“Oo, ngh.....Oohh....”

Yamamoto was crawling on the ground while groaning. He must have been hit somewhere as blood was coming from his head. “It hurts. Help me.....an ambulance.....”

Yamato pointed at Yamamoto.

“Can I borrow that guy for a moment?”

He approached him and fished through his pockets. He took his wallet and pulled out bills from inside it.

“Ahh, thank god. I got the 100,000 yen with this.”

Everyone else had their eyes wide in confusion.

“Wait. What are you doing?”

“Although you’re a pickpocket you’re going to do an act like that so openly?”

Yamato explained the details. “I was asked to by Lin. He said to steal the money back. I guess these two impersonated the Niwaka Samurai and did advanced payment fraud. Genzo-san said he called them up the day before, so I stole a wallet from that other guy, but only 60,000 was inside.”

When he said that Abe finally realized his wallet had been stolen. So that guy pickpocketed my wallet then?

“Just in case I put a transmitter on him when I pickpocketed them. I needed the remaining 40,000 yen, so I tracked him down.” Yamato glanced over at the huge dent in the van and smiled bitterly. “Who knew it would be this big.”

The two men went up on their own against the Kakyuu Group. Although it was just the two of them, one was a former ace hitman from Murder Inc’s Tokyo headquarters, and the other was the strongest killer of killers in Fukuoka. The two mowed down their enemies one after the other as though they were competing in the number they defeat. The thirty odd employees of the mafia were no match for them.

“You don’t have to capture him alive anymore! Kill them immediately!” Li ordered in a booming voice. He had been watching his subordinates fight with a calm expression up until this point, but as the number of his men decreased he began to look apprehensive.

The men faced off with their yakuza swords when they ran out of bullets. They were as good as being unarmed. And yet Saruwatari did not lighten up on his attacks.

It was when the number of opponents remaining were down to five to six people.

“We’ve got a serious issue, Li-san!” Another underling appeared on the rooftop and ran over to Li in a hurry. He then whispered something in his ear.

“.....What did you say?” There was a sudden change to Li’s usual Noh mask. His eyes were open wide. “The president was killed.....?”

There was a disturbance that shot through the surrounding subordinates. They began to talk amongst themselves.

“.....What’s the meaning of this? What about the woman that was with him? Did she get away?”

“W-we don’t know....Please come this way!”

Li turned on his heel, “let’s move out.” He turned his back to the two and left the dead behind. The few remaining subordinates of his soon followed after him.

“.....What the heck. That’s it?” *What a letdown.* Saruwatari spit out as he watched them retreat. “That was boring.”

There was only Saruwatari and the Niwaka Samurai left. And the large pile of dead bodies. The metallic clash of their blades and the men’s cries had ceased, bringing the long awaited silence in their wake.

The Niwaka Samurai sheathed his sword and attempted to make his leave the same way Li and his men did.

“ – Hey.” Saruwatari stopped him and asked. “Where you goin’?”

“If I don’t get back in time, Oiyama will be over.”

“Who really cares about that. This is much more fun, ain’t it? I’m not done yet.”

“I ain’t got time to play with you.”

The Niwaka Samurai began walking again.

“Hold it!”

Saruwatari threw kunai at the man’s head. The kunai passed right in front of

his face and struck the wall ahead of him.

The Niwaka Samurai came to a halt. He slowly turned to face him. “Whatcha think you’re doin’? That’s dangerous.”

“I’m not letting you get away.”

“I can’t have that.” The Niwaka Samurai sighed. He had a little bit of irritation in his voice. “I can play with you at a later date, so how ‘bout you go home for today?”

“You’re really just gonna say that and run? You’re just afraid you’ll lose to me.”

The Niwaka Samurai smirked. “...Afraid? You sure funny.”

He seemed to have finally got into the mood to fight him. The Niwaka Samurai took out his Japanese sword. He held onto the handle with both hands and brandished it high. It was a unique form like he was holding a baseball bat.

‘Oissa! Oissa!’

‘Oissa! Oissa!’

The shouts from the festival resounded around them. On a nearby street one of the floats must be hoisted up.

“Come at me, stupid face.”

The Niwaka Samurai moved at the provocation. He kicked his left leg up and stepped forward.

Saruwatari followed in suite.

“Have at it!” In place of an introduction he first threw five shuriken at him. The Niwaka Samurai dodged them on nimble feet.

“.....You sure are something.”

His eyes widened and he smiled. *This is fun.*

The other made his move. He swung his sword with a quick swing. He pulled out his ninja sword and blocked it. However, he could not stop the force behind it fully. He staggered back.

In that interval of time the Niwaka Samurai swung down his sword again. Saruwatari flung up his legs and dodged the tip of the blade. He landed back on the ground on one hand and dodged another attack as he rotated backwards. Saruwatari made a swing at him. The Niwaka Samurai blocked it. There were sparks. The blade wielders came in contact of one another, and their blades clashed with a clang.

He jammed the scabbard he held in his left hand into the man's gut.

"Guha."

The Niwaka Samurai groaned slightly. He stumbled and fell to one knee.

He had plenty of openings. *I got him.* So he thought.

Saruwatari switched the sword to his other hand and went to slice open the man's throat. The next moment the Niwaka Samurai instantly pulled out the scabbard for his Japanese sword from his waist. The mouth of the sheath stopped the tip of the ninja sword from piercing him. Saruwatari's blade got stuck deep into his scabbard.

He got him. He had blocked his attack with an unexpected method and even took his sword. A natural smile rose to his face. "Haha.....You're seriously dangerous, aintcha?"

The Niwaka Samurai immediately fixed his form and attacked him again. He made sharp thrusts at him. Saruwatari immediately grabbed one of the bodies near him and used it as a shield. The Niwaka Samurai's sword lodged through the body's skull.

Before he could make another swing at him, Saruwatari gave up on retrieving his sword and made distance from the other. He then quickly jumped onto the rooftop of the next building over.

The Niwaka Samurai pursued after him once Saruwatari discarded his weapon. He made a long jump and rolled onto the landing.

Saruwatari took out kunai from his jacket and jumped at his enemy. He raised his arm, aiming for his throat. The other dodged in the nick of time. The tip of the kunai grazed his Niwaka mask. The ridiculous looking mask snapped in half and fell to the ground.

The man also made his own counter attack. He swung his sword at point-blank range. He blocked the kunai, but the blade is pushed back from the impact. The tip of the blade cut Saruwatari's right cheek. The black kerchief covering his face came apart due to the blow. Saruwatari tore off the rest of the cloth and tossed it onto the ground.

Both of their faces are exposed under the bright sky. The Niwaka Samurai was younger than he expected.

"Heh." Saruwatari glared at the man and smirked. "That's a nice look on you."

"Likewise." The Niwaka Samurai smiled back.

'Oissa! Oissa!' There was still the yells of the crowd around them. They could hear the cheering of the spectators and their applause. The ruckus did not seem it would lighten up. 'Oissa! Oissa!'

Their fight resumed. Saruwatari grasped kunai in both of hands and leaped towards his opponent. He continuously attacked in quick succession. The Niwaka Samurai drew back, dodging them.

Saruwatari rotated the kunai in his hands to get a clean slash at him and gripped the other one in his opposite hand. He then aimed for the other's vital area. He closed the distance between them and tried to make a strike to his heart. The Niwaka Samurai pulled back and dodged it. His attack missed, but it grazed his side. His white *happi* turned red from the blood. There was no response. It was a shallow wound.

The other made a counterattack. His Japanese sword grazed Saruwatari's shoulder.

"Oww." He grimaced in pain and ground his teeth as he reeled.

As the Niwaka Samurai half turned he swung his sword. He tried to block the attack with both hands, but unable to take the blow his kunai flung out of his hands. The Niwaka Samurai sidled up to the now unarmed Saruwatari.

Shit, Saruwatari tutted and jumped back. He fished through his pockets to see if he had any weapons at hand left. He had a four sided shuriken in one of his pockets. It was his last one.

The problem was when to use it.

He looked around the area. There was a building in the middle of construction next to them. Saruwatari leapt over there without a second thought and landed on the narrow scaffold. The unstable iron scaffold was one meter in width and ten meters in length. The Niwaka Samurai followed suite, pursuing Saruwatari.

‘Oissa! Oissa!’

‘Oissa! Oissa!’

The two glared at each other quietly on top of the narrow scaffold as the shouts got even louder around them.

The Niwaka Samurai took a step forward.

Now’s my chance. He thought.

Saruwatari ground his teeth and threw his last shuriken. Instead of his head or limbs which could be easier for him to dodge he aimed for his torso. It was a straight throw in dead center.

The moment he would try to dodge the shuriken would be his chance. He would wait for him to lose his balance and tackle him to make him fall to the bottom of the building. That was Saruwatari’s train of thought.

However, the Niwaka Samurai did not dodge the shuriken. He grasped his Japanese sword in both hands and turned to his side. He lifted his leg and made a step. He twisted his torso, crossed his arms and swung his sword.

There was a sharp metallic sound.

No way. Saruwatari’s eyes widened. *This guy hit the shuriken back at me. What a crazy guy. I don’t believe it.*

The shuriken he threw had changed direction and was now coming back at him. Saruwatari tutted.

– Shit. A comebacker.

Saruwatari was the one to lose his balance.

He immediately bent over to dodge the shuriken, and his feet had slipped

from the scaffold. *Fuck*. He thought. Falling. He was going to fall. He will be splattered on the ground. Below was concrete. *I'm going to die*. He thought. He will immediately die on impact from this height. It would be a quick end. He could not help but ridicule to himself for these circumstances.

He was about give up, but Saruwatari reached out and managed to grab the scaffold as he fell. He was almost completely suspended in air. His right arm was the only thing supporting his body weight. However, due to the wound dealt to his shoulder earlier he had no strength in his arm. Unable to hold his weight, the tips of his fingers shook bit by bit.

– Ahh, this is it. I'm at my limit. I'm going to fall.

It was when he was going to give up once more.

“Heey there. You alright?”

The Niwaka Samurai's cheerful voice came from above him.

Just wait a bit. He told him before tossing down the rope that hung around his waist.

“Here, grab onto it.”

The Niwaka Samurai dropped the rope down towards Saruwatari.

“.....Why're you doing this?”

“I have a debt to pay you back for.”

“I don't need your help for that reason!” Saruwatari raised his voice, angry.

With the wind blowing, Saruwatari's body swayed left and right as he hung from the building.

“I won't be pitied for my loss.”

“No.” The Niwaka Samurai was stubborn.

“Let go already!”

“If you fall now you'll be in the way of Yamakasa.”

He was taken aback from that.

He looked down to the ground. He saw the group of men wearing *happi*

running down on the street below.

‘Oissa! Oissa!’

‘Oissa! Oissa!’

The men were carrying the float and were passing directly underneath him. If Saruwatari fell now he would collide with it. There would be a huge commotion over it, and the festival would be suspended.

“So let’s have a draw for today.”

The Niwaka Samurai smiled.

“Dammit.” He clicked his tongue. Damn him for pitying me.

Saruwatari grabbed the rope with both hands. ‘Yaah,’ the Niwaka Samurai yelled as he pulled up Saruwatari.

“.....The next time we meet I’ll give ya a good ol’ punch to that stupid mask of yours, so brace yourself.”

After he scrambled up onto the scaffold, Saruwatari cursed. *I’ll sink a shuriken right between those damn eyebrows. I’ll make you regret saving me.*

He turned his back to the Niwaka Samurai as he thought that to himself.

“I’ll be lookin’ forward to it.”

The Niwaka Samurai said and smiled.

Saruwatari went back to the street he came from earlier. On his way down he picked up his black kerchief he tossed aside and pressed it to the wound on his shoulder. He went down the stairs while trying to stop the bleeding. His arm shook. It was not because of the pain. He was thrilled. His blood felt like it was boiling. The heat in his body could not cool down at the moment. It was only natural. It was the first time he met a man like that. He considered this stranger he had never seen before in his life strong.

Just as Saruwatari exited the Kakyuu Group building he noticed he had an incoming call to his cell phone.

He pressed the accent call button. “.....Hello.”

[Ah, Sarucchi!]

He heard Nitta's voice.

[You weren't picking up, so I was worried. I wondered if you died going up against the Niwaka Samurai.Well, if you're alive then that means you won, right?]

"No," Saruwatari shook his head. "We had a draw."

[Eh? You serious? What do you mean?]

Nitta was shocked. Saruwatari told him in reply.

"Hey, Nao." Saruwatari made a toothy smile, showing his white teeth. "This city sure is quite interesting."

Extra Twelfth Inning & Hero Interview

Top of the Extra Twelfth Inning

After he checked the GPS log he was able to find Banba's current location. He was in Susaki city. He was at the building adjacent to the building belonging to the Kakyuu Group.

He pushed his way through the Yamakasa spectators and hurried to where Banba was. After Lin arrived to the building, he hurried up the stairs. He carefully checked each room on every floor, but he did not see Banba anywhere.

He went up to the highest floor and opened the door to the roof.

A man stood at the center of the rooftop. He was dressed in a white happi and shimekomi and had a Japanese sword in his right hand. He knew even from far away. It was Banba.

What, so he was alive. He gave a small sigh. His happi was soiled in blood, but he seemed to be fine.

He looked around the area. On the rooftop of the building next to them there were men in suits fallen on the ground. They must have been lackeys of the Kakyuu Group. From seeing how much blood they had lost they were likely dead. *Was it Banba's doing? So after he fought the guys over there he jumped over to this building then?*

Just as he pondered over it, Banba noticed his presence and turned towards him.

"Ah, Lin-chan." He said with his usual cheerful voice. "Whatcha doin' here?"

"What? Listen here....."

I came all this way to save you. The old man asked me to.

It was when he was going to tell him that in answer. He saw a silhouette behind Banba.

"Banba!" Lin shouted. "Behind -"

A man stood up from the mountain of bodies on the other rooftop. He appeared to still be alive. Blood was pouring from his head, and he held up a gun, shaking. He was going to shoot. Banba immediately brandished his sword. There was a gunshot. He tried to block the bullet with his blade, but he was slow to swing it. The force of the bullet was stronger than the blade, and the sword rebounded. Banba dropped the handle. The sword was then blown away to Lin's feet.

The man who nearly escaped the verge of death took aim at Banba again, now unarmed.

Lin took out his knife pistol for backup and held it up. However, the effectiveness of his gun was weak if it was not between five to ten meters. There was too much distance between him and the man. Even if he made a shot from here, there was a high possibility the bullet would not hit the man. Even if he managed to hit him it would not be a fatal enough wound to stop him. He would just be wasting the few bullets he had.

Then what should I do? He could not think under the stress.

Banba noticed while Lin was hesitating to pull the trigger.

"Hey!"

He yelled and raised his hand.

Banba was between Lin and the enemy. He was within ten meters from the man. From where he was he could possibility hit him.

The man fired again. There were a succession of gunshots. Banba ran to the side, dodging the bullets.

Lin gripped his knife pistol in his right hand and threw it, matching Banba's speed.

The weapon was thrown at Banba's chest. It was a punctual throwin. Banba caught it with both hands and placed it in his right hand. It was the same execution as when he caught the pitch from the shortstop to throw to first base. He spun around in half a circle and held up the gun. He pointed the tip of the gun towards the man and pulled the trigger.

There were three gunshots.

He splendidly managed to fatally shoot the man in the heart, and he fell.

Banba blew over the mouth of the knife pistol and smirked.

“.....What are you doing acting all cool with your ass hanging out?”

Lin slumped his shoulders.

‘Oissa! Oissa!’

‘Oissa! Oissa!’

Men wearing the same happi jackets as Banba were carrying their floats and heading to the goal on the street directly below them.

“Ahhh.” Banba scratched at his head and grimaced. “I ain’t gonna make it to Yamakasa now.”

He was terribly crestfallen.

“It’s not that big of a deal, right? They’ll be one again next year.”

Even though he tried to cheer him up, Banba merely pouted. “That ain’t the problem.”

Banba started to sing suddenly while gazing into the distance in regret. “Celebrate, Wakamatsu-sama~.”

“What is that song?”

“It’s *Iwaimedeta*.”

“Ee-why-meh-deh-tah?”

“It’s a Hakata song for celebration. It’s sung in the beginning of Yamakasa.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Your branches and flourished leaves are rampant~.”

He hummed the strange lyrics of the song while clapping his hands. His face looked desolate. He really could not bear not being able to go to Yamakasa.

“.....I’m hungry.” Lin then suggested. “Let’s go home and have some ramen.”

I guess I’ll treat for today.

“Now then everyone! Don’t hold back from drinking and eating as much as you like!” Jiro held up his beer mug and raised his voice. “Since today it’s Lin-chan’s treat!”

Jiro took the lead, and everyone but Lin rose up from their seats.

“Cheers!” As he watched them clank their glasses Lin gave a sigh.

The grass-lot baseball primaries were going to start soon, and so there were rallies for it now as well. They were at a chain pub often found in the area. They had private rooms for large groups of people to reserve.

The expenses for the get-together were all Lin’s. There were the nine Tonkotsu members, the coach Genzo, and Misaki. Lin had to cover for the food and drinks for eleven people by himself. The member who least made feats in the game had to treat everyone as part of the punishment made earlier at the last practice game.

“Excuse me.” Banba called out to the server. At some point his glass became empty. “Could I have a refill of draft beer?”

“Ah, me too.”

“Me too.”

“Three draft beers, please.” After he held up three fingers, Banba then pointed to the menu.

“And then can we have all the food listed on this page?”

“Hey, stop, idiot Ban!” Lin unconsciously raised his voice. *How much do you plan on frickin’ eating?* He glared at Banba. *How dare he take advantage of other people paying.* “Hold back a little.”

Each person enjoyed themselves; the inside of the private room had a lively atmosphere from beginning to end. Banba and Yamato, sitting in the center, and Jiro especially were gulping down beers one after the other and got into high spirits, slightly tipsy. Each time they made an order Yamato would ask for the contact information of the female servers.

At the end of the table, Enokida and Shigematsu were discussing work. Shigematsu was sitting to Lin’s right side and Enokida was sitting across from

him.

“That reminds me.” Enokida asked him. “I heard that the head of the Kakyuu Group died?”

“It was poison.” Shigematsu answered as he gulped down his shouchuu beverage. “He had a small cut no more than a centimeter long around his artery on his neck. The poison must have been administered that way. There’s speculation the culprit was a woman killer.”

“Is that true?” Lin was shocked. He could not believe someone could kill Long Fang Wang with ease considering how many guards he had. *How did she do it?*

“You said it was a cut.....What was the weapon?” He tilted his head in wonder. In order to be left alone with Wang they had to pass an elaborate body check process. It should have been impossible to bring in a weapon.

“From the autopsy results they found nitrocellulose and toluene on his wound.”

Enokida grinned at Shigematsu’s words. “The composition of nail polish.”

“Is that it?” Lin raised his voice. The composition of nail polish. A cut not even a centimeter long. He knew what the weapon was. “Nail extensions?”

There were various shapes for nail extensions. There was the standard opal, the round, cut square, and a tipped point shapes.

If someone dipped the pointed shaped one into poison, they would become a great lethal weapon. And initially they would look like normal nails. No one would guess those cutely decorated nails could be used as a murder weapon. He could not blame the henchmen for missing that.

“That killer sure is something.” Enokida remarked in admiration.

Lin nodded as well. It was a simple method, but it was perfectly ambiguous. He did not know who hired her, but there was no mistaking that she was a skilled killer.

“Excuse meee.” Banba voiced. He had called for a server. “Can I have one more beer!”

Lin made an annoyed face, giving him a side glance, and muttered. “.....Isn’t

he going a bit fast?”

Saitou was sitting to the right of Enokida. Saitou’s glass hardly was drank in contrast to Banba, who was downing beer mugs one after the other. Saitou’s expression was dark as well.

“What’s wrong, Saitou-kun?” Enokida spoke up. “You don’t look so good.”

“.....As if I could be fine right now.” Saitou answered him bitterly. “I was almost killed by a killer for a second time today.”

“That’s quite the disaster.”

“Although, it was your fault to begin with!”

“And you got me involved too.” Lin frowned. He was woken up early in the morning and had to fight a killer in a train one on one.

“Thank you for that time.” Saitou made an apologetic expression and bowed his head.

“.....Whenever I think that the company is still going to come after me for my life,” Saitou turned teary eyed and had a shaky voice. He braced his head in his hands. “I can’t get into the mood to drink.”

Enokida said to him to cheer him up while patting his back.

“Don’t worry.” He grinned. “Didn’t I say I’d make it up to you?”

Bottom of Extra Twelfth Inning

When he opened his eyes there were lights. They shone brightly on Yamamoto’s face.

A man was peering at him. He could not make out his face from the back lighting, but he was wearing a mask and appeared to be a doctor. He seemed to be in the middle of surgery. He must have been sleeping upon the operating table.

Why am I here? Is this a hallucination?Ahh, that’s right. Now that I’m thinking about it, Yamamoto recalled. I got into an accident. When he tried to make a run for it he got hit by a car. He was hit by the full impact, and he was dazed. At some point he lost consciousness. He remembered hitting his head on

the window and blood pouring from his head. From the severe pain he was in, he thought he was going to die.

He must have been put into an ambulance and sent to a hospital. When he opened his eyes again he would be in a hospital bed. That was what he thought.

However, he was not. Yamamoto was in the center of a spacious warehouse for some reason. His wrists and ankles were tied together, and he was crawling on the ground like a caterpillar.

A man stood in front of him. He was a young man he was unfamiliar with. He had silver mushroom-like hair and long bangs that covered half of his face.

“You there.” The mushroom head male grinned at him, showing his teeth. “You mistakenly killed a bystander right?”

When he mentioned that he remembered. About the job they accepted from their mediator back in late June. Yamamoto mistook their target and ended up killing the wrong person.

“ – Then you won’t have any complaints being mistakenly killed in someone else’s place, right?”

The young man uttered an unbelievable statement.

What do you mean? Yamamoto’s eyes widened. *What are you planning?* Although he tried to question it, his mouth was covered by packing tape. He could not speak.

After awhile,

“Sorry for making you wait.”

Another man appeared. From what he could see he was not Japanese. He was Asian.

“Hey, Nguyen.” The young male spoke to him. “An acquaintance of mine coincidentally caught the man you were looking for. So they handed him over for me.”

“You were a big help.”

“Now you can do whatever you like with him.”

The man named Nguyen took a close look at Yamamoto’s face. “We meet again, huh, Saitou.”

Saitou?

Who’s that? Yamamoto tilted his head.

“I was in a huge pinch thanks to that hitman you hired. I was wearing a bulletproof vest, so I survived, but man did that guy me a number.....So in return I’m going to hurt you good and then kill you. So prepare yourself.”

The man easily picked up Yamamoto’s body. He then left the warehouse and put him in a black vehicle parked outside.

Seeing his reflection in the car window, Yamamoto’s eyes popped out of his head in shock.

Who the hell is this?

He was shocked seeing his face. What was there was a completely different person. *Just how? Special makeup? Plastic surgery? When?*

He instantly had a thought. Maybe it was then? Was that operation a plastic surgery?

Yamamoto paled.

This man had some sort of connection with this Saitou person. A relationship in which he had to die. And this person is mistaking Yamamoto as that Saitou. He at last became aware he was in the worst situation.

No. This is a misunderstanding. My name isn’t Saitou. You’ve got the wrong person. Don’t kill me. Although he tried to yell them, his mouth was sealed shut and he could not. Nevertheless, Yamamoto kept shaking his head desperately.

Hero Interview

The batter hit back the ball Saitou pitched. It could have passed between first and second, but the shortstop Lin made a splendid diving catch. Lin remained on the ground. He could not throw from that posture. The batting runner was quick on his feet. Even if he got up and threw to first he would not make it in

time to get him out.

Seeing that, the second baseman Banba moved.

“Hey!”

He called out to Lin. He went over close to second base. Lin threw the ball towards Banba while still laying down. It was a superb glove toss. Banba caught it barehanded, and while rotating his body he pitched it to first. It was close in timing, but they managed to cut off the batting runner.

With that it was three outs. They changed positions. The scene had two outs and a space open on second base. The runner cut passed the starting point and immediately got to third base. If the hit ball had passed through them they would have lost a point. Even if the player made it to first base safely their team would have gotten a point. It was a tough situation, but the middle fielders pulled through.

“Nice! Lin! Banba!”

The other nine members called out to the two returning to the benches. Everyone was clapping their hands in praise.

“When you try you can really work together, huh, you guys.”

“They’ve finally become proper midfielders, haven’t they?”

It was the first game for the Fukuoka softball league primaries.

Their opponents were the Kokura Fried Wings, a team based in Kitakyushu. Saitou started the top of first inning. They had some runners, but they managed to have them scoreless.

The nine returned to the benches and began to make preparations to change to offense. The first to bat was Enokida. He put on his helmet on his mushroom-like hair and started to make practice swings.

“Whoa.” Yamato suddenly raised his voice. He pointed to the benches near third base.

“That team’s manager is downright gorgeous!Wonder if I should approach her after the game is over.”

Yamato grinned, but Enokida told him. "That person is likely Banba's ex lover."

"Ehh, are you serious?" Yamato's eyes widened.

"Wait, what woman?" Jiro also leaned forward.

"The person who looks like they're from Munakata City."

".....You sure know everything." Martinez was amazed.

"Hey now, stop with the gossipin'." Banba pushed Enokida and Yamato's helmets further on their heads. "Focus on the game."

The pitcher wearing the vertically striped uniform began practicing his pitches on top of the mound. He had a right-hand submarine throw.

Their coach Genzo muttered to himself while watching him. "An underthrow pitcher.....That's gonna be tough."

He had a unique form to release the ball mere centimeters off the ground. He was a type of pitcher they had never gone up against before.

The first to bat, Enokida, missed and got three strikes.

"That's rare of you to get three strikes."

"It's difficult to hit that ball." Enokida pouted as he took off his helmet. The shape of his hair was a mess. "He didn't have enough control pitching it."

They certainly could not say good compliments about the pitcher's control. It was quite rough. Just as he thought it greatly strayed from the striking zone it would then closely flew by the corner of it. Sometimes he would throw straight in center, but other moments he would completely pitch it in the wrong direction. It was hard to evaluate what pitch it was. It was not as though they were mixed pitches on purpose, but rather the pitcher still has not grasped controlling his pitch. That was the impression he had. The umpire and the lead-off man had a difficult time trying to stop the balls pitched around everywhere like goalkeepers.

The second batter Yamato had went for a safety bunt, but there was more force to the ball than he expected and it ended up flying into the air. "Damn, it's hard to hit that pitcher's throws."

They had two outs and no runners on the bases.

Next the third batter Banba entered the batter's box.

It was the first pitch. A straight ball flew up high. It was aiming right for Banba's head. Banba greatly moved back to dodge the ball. He turned over from the force and fell down onto the ground. It was a dangerous pitch that nearly nicked him in the head.

The team's pitcher smoothed down the mound with a composed expression as though nothing had happened.

Banba saw that and banged his bat against the ground.

".....This isn't good." Shigematsu held his head. "Banba lost it."

Banba turned towards the pitcher and yelled at him.

"What's up with your attitude?!"

The other replied back immediately. "Shut it! Go and get yourself ready!"

"You ain't gonna tip off your hat?!"

"Haa? You wanna go at it, huh!"

Banba was livid and rushed towards the pitcher.

"Oh? Is this a fight?" Martinez was practicing his swings in front of the benches and put down the bat. He headed over to the mound cheerfully.

"Leave this to me."

On the mound, Banba grabbed a hold on the pitcher. The man hit Banba on the head.

They began to scuffle.

The members on both teams dashed out of the benches and rushed over to the two. Martinez stood between them and was trying to pull Banba off the man he grabbed. The game was completely suspended.

Lin stood off near home plate and watched the fight from a distance. He's such a pain in the ass. He slumped his shoulders. Why is it he always gets so worked up when it comes to baseball?

“We’re sorry our pitcher is causing trouble.”

A woman came out from the benches near third base and talked to Lin. She was the manager of the other team Yamato mentioned earlier. She looked to be in her late twenties. She had short black hair. He heard she was Banba’s ex lover, but she was beautiful.

He felt like he saw her face somewhere before. Her hair style was different, but he felt she awfully looked similar to the hostess at that club.

“.....No, not really.” Lin answered her bluntly. “Ours is too.”

“I guess you’re right.” The woman smiled. “He’s an insane man as always.”

“Sayuri-saaan.” The bespectacled umpire called out to the woman. “Please bring out the emergency kit.”

The woman nodded and headed back to the benches.

Lin looked back towards the mound. The two men did not stop fighting each other still. The pitcher also struck his teammates who were trying to stop him. Martinez struggled to hold back the man throwing punches indiscriminately. *I guess I should go and help out too then.* Lin walked over to the mound as well.

The two continued to bicker at each other.

“You no-control, clumsy pitcher!”

“Shut it! My first pitches are just bad!”

The pitcher made a swing with his fist. And Banba threw one back. It was like a close counter in boxing. Their fists sunk into each other’s faces. Banba’s helmet and the pitcher’s hat were blown off from the blow and fell through the air.

Under the pouring sunlight their faces were fully exposed.

“.....Ah?”

“.....Hm?”

They both closely looked at each other’s faces and muttered that at the same time.

They then raised their voices in shock.

“Wait, could you be -”

“Ah! You’re that guy from -”

Banba and the pitcher pointed at each other and had their eyes wide open.

Lin tilted his head slightly, seeing their odd behavior. “What? You know each other?”

GAME SET



GAME SET

Afterword

This story is fiction. The pseudo-Fukuoka is the stage of this story, which is written by an author who utterly failed her elementary Fukuoka *kentei* exam even though she had lived in Fukuoka for more than twenty years. The existing characters, groups, and names of certain places do not have any relation to Fukuoka in real life, so please be advised.

That said, I am very grateful to have been able to write a continuation to this story. Compared to the first volume where there was some carnage with people dying one after the other like a pitcher's battle that are unable to obtain one point, I feel this volume has more of the feeling of: 'the pitcher staff are all in an uproar; there are errors, dog fights, and a game scuffle between idiots.' This is another test, and I hope you enjoyed seeing Lin grow a little.

In this work a new character makes his appearance in Kokura of Kitakyu City. Kokura was the first place where I lived by myself. Even now I still go over and hang out in Kokura a few times a month and have a blast drinking at restaurants in Kaji City or Konya City until morning. And with memories of that place I ended up putting it in the story. For everyone in Fukuoka as well as Kitakyushu, I give my thanks.

Now again, in the work the Hakata Gion Yamakasa was taking place, but it is a wonderful festival packed with the feelings of male Fukuokans that I could not possibly manage to describe with my ability. When I first saw it in real life I cried from the intensity of it. By the off chance you have the thought, 'I'd like to go to Fukuoka and see Yamakasa,' from my work, then there is no greater joy for me.

And now even with the second volume I have many people who have helped me. I deeply give my thanks.

To the heads of the editorial department Wada-sama and Endou-sama I'm in debt to. Thanks to you two always supporting me, I managed to stay on course. Thank you so much!

And to Ichihiro Hako-sama for drawing these amazing illustrations. I'm deeply impressed to see Ichihiro-sama able to illustrate the Niwaka Samurai as I hoped

for. Let's go out and eat somewhere again sometime!

And for everyone else who participated in publishing this work. And to my friend, N (Born and raised in the southern ward of Kokura, Kitakyushu), for editing Saruwatari's Kitakyushu dialect and my father who of the mixed pitches for the opening baseball scene, you have my gratitude.

And finally, to the readers. So you will not run out of patience, I will put my heart and soul into the next one even more. And again, for purchasing another one of my novels once more, I thank you so much! Until we can meet again!

Chiaki Kisaki